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CHAUCER'S PRESENTATION OF THE CHURCH
IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

James Joseph Creighton, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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Life

The author was born in Chicago, Illinois on April 19, 1930. After attending Our Lady of Peace Grade School and Saint Ignatius High School, he entered the Society of Jesus on August 22, 1947 at Milford Novitiate, Milford, Ohio. In 1951, he began philosophical studies at West Baden College, which is affiliated with Loyola University, and received the Bachelor of Arts Degree in the following year. In 1954, he entered the teaching period of Jesuit training at Saint Xavier High School, Cincinnati, Ohio, where he now resides.

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CHAPTER I

CHAUCER'S PURPOSE IN WRITING

THE CANTERBURY TALES

No great literary work is ever fully appreciated without a careful study of the subject matter which is treated and the manner in which it is presented. When a great work also uncovers a life as it was lived six centuries ago, a full appreciation is impossible without a knowledge of the times and an understanding of the author's complete purpose in writing. When Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his Canterbury Tales, he gave to the world a masterpiece of description and narration. Even more, he brought to succeeding generations a vivid picture of fourteenth-century persons, customs, and problems. "This method of opening a window upon life and letting the reader see the persons and events of the writer's vision is habitual with Chaucer."¹

But what prompted Chaucer to open this "window" and to depict persons and conditions so accurately as to produce a literary work which carries weight even among historians? The answer to this question rests in these chapters. Regarding the

¹ John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer (New York, 1926), p. 295.

historical value of the Canterbury Tales, R. Trevor Davies, Tutor of Modern History at Oxford's Honour School, affirms: "It is possible that Chaucer himself made the pilgrimage to Canterbury in 1385, and based his 'Prologue' to some extent on his own experience. However this may be, there is no need to enlarge upon its value as an historical document for the study of social, religious, and economic conditions in the later half of the thirteenth [sic] century."² To consider fully the motivation which prompted Chaucer to write the Canterbury Tales and the consequences of this masterpiece is the goal of this thesis. Another manner of expressing this goal: to show that Chaucer's attitude toward the Church from an analysis of the five principal churchmen of the Canterbury Tales is that of a good, orthodox Catholic, and perhaps even that of an "internal reformer."

When Chaucer wrote, he wrote for a select group. As Professor Manly tells us: "Chaucer was not writing for posterity or even for the whole contemporary population of England, but for a handful of courtiers, gentlemen, churchmen, professional men, officials, and city merchants."³ With this audience in mind, he had as his first purpose to provide them with entertainment in the

² R. Trevor Davies, Documents of Medieval England (London, 1926), p. 277.

³ Manly, p. 76.

form of rollicking tales. This is evident from his subject matter. Variety and vividness with all kinds of colorful, life-like characters who tell their best stories in their best style were Chaucer's means to success as an entertainer. This clever, witty literary genius paints some of the brightest and most realistic pictures ever imagined by a reader, pictures typical of fourteenth-century life.

Chaucer's sketches. . . are largely typical, it is true. The Host, for instance, is in many ways typical of hosts or innkeepers in general, at least of the old England of Chaucer's day, and perhaps of England down to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The same is true of the Yeoman, the Prioress, the Merchant, and others of the pilgrims. But the portrait of the Host is highly particularized too, and it seems probable that Chaucer was sketching an actual innkeeper of Southwark of that day and even of that name, whom he knew well. And this may be the case with several, or even many of the other pilgrims. So vivid are these portraits and so full of highly significant details that scholars have sought to find their originals in certain of Chaucer's contemporaries.⁴

With quick, deft strokes from the artist's brush, Chaucer portrays on his canvas true-to-life gentlemen who are not too gentle, ladies who lack reserve, and religious who do little to foster religion. And this picture of fourteenth-century England as presented by Chaucer introduces the reader to another purpose of the Canterbury Tales, a purpose which, although less

⁴ Percy Van Dyke Shelly, The Living Chaucer, (Philadelphia, 1940), pp. 194-195. For the most ambitious attempts in this kind see Manly, pp. 70-264.

easily recognized by readers, is nevertheless unquestionably intended by Chaucer. In the characters of the Canterbury Tales, many disheartening truths of the fourteenth century are hidden; often enough, these ugly facts are not even hidden. Such unsavory facts are material for Chaucer's great power of irony, which is strongly exercised when he depicts the clergy. The constant recurrence of the same under-theme forces the reader beyond a doubt to recognize a secondary purpose in the Canterbury Tales. The poet is painfully aware of the sins of the fourteenth-century clergymen and his repugnance at such deplorable conditions is even explicitly stated in the text.

Professor French sets the stage with his plain statement: "A spirit of sacrifice, a respect for authority, an acceptance of discipline, and at least a modicum of otherworldliness were the characteristics which the Church must foster. . . . Anyone acquainted with Chaucer's monk, friar, pardoner, and summoner hardly needs to be told that such characteristics were often wanting in the very servants of the Church."⁵ Here Professor French actually stated Church conditions in a rather general and gentle fashion. The truth of the picture is as Chaucer actually saw them, and as he did present them, i.e., concretely and in all their graphic reality.

⁵ Robert Dudley French, A Chaucer Handbook. 2nd ed. (New York, 1947), p.35.

It is the endeavor of this paper to become acquainted with these "servants of the Church" in Chaucer's England, to see the deplorable conditions surrounding the Church, and to conclude to the exact attitude of mind which Chaucer displayed toward the Church when writing his last great work.

Contrasted with the abuses of the clergy is the Poor Parson of a Town, whom the Poet characterizes with all reverence as a strong, devout personality. The presence of this ideal shepherd of souls is conclusive proof that Chaucer had a further end in view than the mere laughter of his readers. He had what we have termed a "secondary purpose" in writing the Tales. Were Chaucer to have omitted this one character, the Poor Parson of a Town, his full intention in writing the Canterbury Tales would be quite different. But as it is, Chaucer points to the Parson. His arm sweeps past the Monk, the Pardoner, the Friar, and the Summoner, to be directed at length toward the Parson. How fitting it is that the Parson should close the Tales, that he should prepare the souls of all for the blessings at the Martyr's shrine, that he should be, as it were, saved until the end in order that Chaucer might leave his readers with the "right impression"!

An important objection is sometimes leveled against the significance of the final portion of the Parson's Tale. The argument that Chaucer did not arrange the order of the Tales is couched in such statements as the following: "though we shall

never know--in such confusion were his [Chaucer's] papers left when he was cut off--precisely how he would have arranged the stories if he had lived to finish his design, we have more than twenty of them, besides the Prologue; and they are sufficiently connected with one another to enable us to appreciate the panoramic effect he intended."⁶ Root has a similar comment: "When Chaucer died, the Canterbury Tales were still unfinished. It seems clear that the pile of manuscript which he left gave no certain indication of the order in which he intended to incorporate the various fragments into a unified whole. Perhaps he himself had had no settled intention in the matter. Various scribes tried in various ways to arrange the sequence; and the result was the discord which now exists in the surviving manuscripts."⁷

Regardless of the problem of arrangement, there should not be the slightest doubt that Chaucer intended the Canterbury Tales to close fittingly with the Parson's Tale. As the Poet himself declares:

⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, trans. J. U. Nicolson (New York, 1934), p. vii.

⁷ Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1922), p. 298.

Upon this word we han assented soone,
 For, as it seemed, it was for to doone,
 To enden in som vertuous sentence."⁸

This remark in the Parson's Prologue, coupled with his whole attitude when presenting the Parson, indicates that Chaucer "points" to the Parson with admiration and even with a spirit of exhortation. All the internal evidence of the poem indicates his utter contempt for religious who are base and hypocritical, just as it indicates his complete appreciation for a religious who is worthy and honest. He sees an age filled with terrible vices; and although these facts afford ample opportunity for ridicule, they also win from Chaucer a tone of disgust and an apparent desire to remedy.

But why should the carefree Chaucer tend to criticize abuses of churchmen? What prompted the secondary purpose? There was, first of all, a certain spiritual common sense which men of the Middle Ages had. They instinctively knew the value of the Church in their lives.

It is true that the medieval Church possessed nearly one-sixth of the wealth of the civilized world, but what were its obligations?-- the care of the sick, the education of the people, the maintenance of roads and

⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, Pars. Prol., 61-63, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1933), p.272. Reference will be made to this volume as Complete Works, and all quotations from Chaucer will follow this text.

bridges for pilgrims, provision for the widow and orphan, the encouragement of art, the construction of churches and cathedrals, the support of Catholic ritual and, in fact, every human activity except the conduct of war and the care of prisoners. When Taine calls attention to the fact that the medieval Church received ten times the revenue of the State, it were well to remind him that the Church had fifty times the obligations of the State.

.
The Church. . . was the very centre of every phase of medieval activity and it followed as a natural consequence that the central dogma of the Church was the very centre of men's lives. That dogma, as we know, was and is the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar. That is the reason why it could be said so truly of the Middle Ages that 'a perfect church, within whose walls is passing the ordered pageantry unnumbered generations have built up in beauty, and through the seven arts, to do honour and reverence to the Creator and Redeemer of the world, there present in the Holy Sacrament of the altar, is the greatest work of man.'⁹

Since the Church figured very closely in common affairs, Chaucer certainly would have experienced this warm Christian spirit.

Evidence from the Canterbury Tales will prove for certain that he knew well what a representative of the Church ought to be and was clearly conscious of the many sins of the clergy who were falling so far short of their ideal.

Secondly, Chaucer's close association with John of Gaunt, Earl of Richmond, and later Duke of Lancaster, as well as

⁹ Terence L. Connolly, S.J., An Introduction to Chaucer and Langland (New York, 1925), pp. 35-36. Quotation from Ralph Adams Cram, The Heart of Europe.

the most powerful member of the nobility, gave him ample opportunity to see with all-embracing glances the conditions of religious spirit throughout England. But great a patron of Chaucer's as he was, John of Gaunt was not Chaucer's only patron.

Chaucer succeeded in winning for himself and in keeping all his life, the protection, one might almost say the friendship of John of Gaunt. The old king Edward III appreciated and loved him. Capricious Richard II gave him as constant a patronage as he was capable of, and notwithstanding, the usurper Henry IV took him into favor from the time of his accession. Women, naturally partial to the poet of love, seem to have been particularly kind to him. There is every likelihood that the Duchess Blanche of Lancaster and Queen Anne of Bohemia were instrumental in obtaining many of the privileges he enjoyed.¹⁰

To the interested members of the nobility, the pleas which the King and councilmen were sending to the Pope were well-known. For example, we have the document signed by King Richard II and council members which Professor Kuhl offers as an indication of public opinion between the critical years 1387 and 1390. Dated at Westminster palace in May 1390, it reads in part:

"False shepherds and hirelings are entering the fold, Christ's sheep are a prey of wolves . . . men of letters manifestly fitted for the cure of souls and to profit the king and realm by their council, public and private, having no hope of advancement, abandon their studies at the universities, the number of the clergy is diminishing, and learning is dying out. Wherefore in the

10 Emile Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer (London, 1928), p. 20.

parliament last holden at London,"¹¹ grievous complaint was made by the lords and commons requiring the king, in accordance with the oath taken at his coronation that he should preserve the rights of the crown and the liberties of the realm and the church, to cause the said statutes to be observed; and praying the pope as successor of the chief of the apostles, who took upon him the command of Christ to feed his sheep and not to shear them. . . to do away the scandles and perils above rehearsed, so that the king and his people, being desirous to reverence the person of the pope and the church of Rome, may have rest from these burdens . . . and may enjoy their ancient liberty."¹²

Professor Kuhl then points out that "no official of the church escapes censure, from the lowest to the bishop,"¹³ and that "the council is merely echoing public sentiment as strongly voiced by the lords and commons at Parliament a few weeks before."¹⁴

Then too, because of his contacts with those of the "higher society", among whom were so many clerics, Chaucer was to some extent acquainted with the admonitions of the Church toward her clergy. In the chapter on "Religious Imposters" of Father Connolly's An Introduction to Chaucer and Langland, we find a list of ecclesiastical protests which were issued against the abuses of Pardoners:

¹¹ The session was from January 17 to March 2 of either 1389 or 1390.

¹² E. P. Kuhl, "Chaucer and the Church," MLN, XI (June 1925), 322-323.

¹³ Ibid., 323.

¹⁴ Ibid., 324.

Letter of Richard de Bury, 1340
 Pronouncement of the Synod of Dublin, 1348
 Bull of Urban V, 1369
 Letter of Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1378
 Bull of Pope Boniface IX, 1390
 Opinion of the University of Oxford, 1414¹⁵

Significant also in Chaucer's relationship to John of Gaunt is the close relationship between the celebrated Duke of Lancaster and the Oxford theologian, reformer John Wyclif. The secondary purpose of the Canterbury Tales takes on a new importance when Wyclif enters the picture. Since it is the task of a later chapter to consider this importance, suffice it now to insist that there was to some extent a spirit of reform enkindled in the heart of Chaucer. The source of this spirit would result to great extent from the previously mentioned reasons. That Wyclif made his contribution to this spirit is possible, but the careful analysis of the nature of Chaucer's spirit of reform and that of Wyclif's will follow.

Finally, the Poet found in the abuses of the clergy a grand opportunity for humorous irony. Perhaps this motive best suits Chaucer's tendencies and abilities. Seldom does a reader find in literature passages which bring home more poignantly the vices of such a corrupted group. There are many examples of these vices in Chaucer's Tales, as well as in other satires of the time.

¹⁵ Connolly, pp. 55-56.

Professor French aptly comments: "No institution in fourteenth-century England was so often the object of satire as the Church. The great organization, with its wealth, its power, and its conservative traditions, might have been expected to offer a safeguard against social decay; but the Church itself was a fruitful breeding-ground for the very things which were disorganizing feudal society."¹⁶

That Chaucer had a secondary purpose in writing the Canterbury Tales is evident at this point in the treatment. This chapter has indicated that he was prompted to attain this purpose for the following reasons: because of a certain spiritual common sense, because of the view which he had of England's dying religious spirit, because of the numerous admonitions of the Church toward her clergy, because of a possible acquaintance with John Wyclif, and because of the opportunity for humorous irony.

A sense of justice prompts a careful study of the conditions of the Church. Why was she so weak? Exactly what was Her condition at the time when Chaucer was writing about Her representatives? The answers to these questions form the subject matter of the following chapter.

¹⁶ French, p. 35.

CHAPTER II

CHAUCEER'S VIEW OF THE CHURCH IN ENGLAND'S FOURTEENTH CENTURY

When Chaucer lived the Church was weak. She suffered from abuses within her sacred walls and from all kinds of attacks without. This situation has already been touched upon in the brief segment of the document which Richard II sent to the Pope. But it would be unfair to the Church not to mention some of the causes which led to Her weakness at this time, just as it would be incomplete to bypass a presentation of the times which were so evident to Chaucer and which were such an influence on his writing.

There are at least three basic historical reasons which explain the wretched condition of the Church at this time: the worldly self-seeking of churchmen, the Black Death, and the Great Western Schism. Of course, these causes are not mutually exclusive. The Black Death, for example, was certainly one reason for the large number of self-seeking clergymen as will be explained presently."¹ In addition to these gigantic causes for Church

¹ Mention is made merely in passing that these are the years too of the great Hundred Years' War between England and France and for England's Great Peasants' Revolt of 1381--historical facts which put England in an agonizing period.

weakness was the appearance of an arch-reformer, John Wyclif.

Attention is first called to the worldly self-seeking churchmen established throughout England. Muriel Bowden in her commentary on the Friar gives a brief history of the early Mendicant Orders of the Church. Her praise of their effort to live according to the Gospels is lessened, however, as she relates the historical fact that:

Heart-sickening decay set in with even the second generation of friars. These men had not known the inspiring founders, and so were without the burning desire to strive after the unattainable. Furthermore, the intricate realities of a sophisticated social system made absolute poverty impossible, and begging, which St. Francis had permitted only as a necessity, became the exceedingly profitable business of the Order... As early as 1234, Matthew Paris writes . . . "Desirous of obtaining privileges in the courts of kings and potentates, they (the friars) act the parts of councillors, chamberlains, treasurers, bridegrooms, and mediators for marriages; they are the executors of the papal extortions; in their sermons, they either are flatterers or most cutting reprovers, revealers of confessions, or imprudent accusers."²

In a similar vein, Professor French attributes the weakness of the Church fundamentally to worldly self-seeking churchmen:

At the root of all the evils in the fourteenth-century church, lay this spirit of worldly self-seeking. It was this which drew the parish priest away from his ill-paid and toilsome duties in the country, to seek easy

² Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1949), pp. 121-122.

employment singing Masses in a chantry established by some wealthy person's bequest; it was this which increased the swarm of secular "clerks", who sought their living in government posts or in the households of the rich; it was this which produced the "Heap of hermits" whom Langland saw making their way toward the shrine of Walsingham — "great lanky lubbers who are loth to work."³

Bernhard Ten Brink in his History of English Literature mentions as a point of introduction to his treatment of John Wyclif: "In those days in England, as almost everywhere else, the fight against the worldliness of the clergy went hand in hand with the endeavor to withdraw the secular power, as well as the external organization of the national church, as much as possible from the papal influence."⁴ The Church at this time could not remedy the situation, for the very instruments whereby she brings her soul-saving message were for the most part incapable of rendering her just service.

The laxity of the clergy was a natural consequence of another problem which faced the Roman Catholic Church of England. The Black Death appeared at Dorset on July 7, 1348. Chaucer was about eight years old at this time. Perhaps he could recall scenes of this great plague's effects, scenes of agony, death, mass-burial. Before it was finally stamped out, this terrible

³ Robert Dudley French, A Chaucer Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York, 1947), p.38.

⁴ Bernhard Ten Brink, History of English Literature, II (New York, 1893), p.3.

plague had carried off almost half the population of England.

John Tracy Ellis relates:

In no sphere of life did the effects of the Black Death manifest themselves more than in the life of the Church. The clerical order was severely hit. The country pastors and curates died honorably at their posts, but the scarcity of priests made it very difficult for the ministrations of religion to reach all. In the diocese of Norwich alone more than eight hundred parishes lost their pastors twice within one year. Of course, the monasteries became almost depopulated.⁵

Cardinal Gasquet puts the terrible mortality in round numbers for us:

Assuming the deaths of beneficed clergy to have been about 5,000, the total death roll in the clerical order would be some 25,000. . . . On the supposition that five-and-twenty thousand of the clerical body fell victims to the epidemic, and estimating that of the entire population of the country one in every hundred belonged to the clergy, and further that the death rate was about equal in both estates, the total mortality in the country would be some 2,500,000. This total is curiously the same as that estimated from the basis of population returns made at the close of the memorable reign of Edward III, evidencing, namely, a total population, before the outbreak of the epidemic, of some five millions.⁶

The effects upon the Church which were the outcome of this great disaster are obvious. Bishops were granted permission

5 John Tracy Ellis, Anti-Papal Legislation in Medieval England (1066-1377) (Washington, D.C., 1930), pp. 109-110.

6 Francis Aidan Gasquet, D.D., The Black Death of 1348 and 1349 (London, 1908), pp. 237-238.

by the Pope to ordain young, inexperienced, and uneducated clerics. It was the only alternative, for otherwise the Mass and the sacraments would have been withdrawn from the exhausted soul of a nation which had long proved its devotion to the Holy See of Rome. As John Ellis states: "The result of the plague upon ecclesiastical discipline was at first a relaxation of Church rules. Priests were so scarce that deacons were permitted to give Holy Communion, and faith supplied the place of Extreme Unction."⁷

From these authoritative quotations then, it is easy to see why the Church as a whole would be terribly weakened. Those who truly served Christ's Church stayed with their suffering flocks and died in the Plague. Those who lacked religious conviction left their charges to seek their own protection and returned once the danger had passed.

In 1378, the Roman Catholic Church suffered one of the greatest blows of her history.

After the death of Gregory XI, the Roman people demanded the election of a Roman; and the cardinals chose the archbishop of Bari, who took the name of Urban VI. His election came as a compromise arranged by several factions; he was really the first choice of none. Conscientious and stern, he immediately began to attack the immorality and worldliness of the clergy. He created many enemies and alienated a number of his supporters by several hasty and arbitrary

⁷ Ellis, p. 110.

acts, and by public rebukes to prelates and cardinals despite the warnings of St. Catherine of Siena, who begged him to be more tactful. After he had declared his purpose of creating a majority of Italian cardinals and of never transferring the papal residence back to France, thirteen cardinals, encouraged by the French king, Charles V, met at Anagni in August 1378, announced that Urban's election had been invalid and chose Cardinal Robert of Geneva to be pope. Robert took the name of Clement VIII. The Great Schism of the West had begun.⁸

During these tragic years, Chaucer was writing his Canterbury Tales. The Schism outlived Chaucer by thirty-one years; yet, even when Chaucer wrote his masterpiece, the effects of the Schism were fully felt as clergymen failed miserably to execute commands from Church Authority. In the course of the Schism, nine persons claimed Divine Authority: five at Rome, two at Avignon, and two at Pisa. Confusion reigned in the minds of the English as well as in all Christendom. While claimants to the Chair of Peter excommunicated one another, new spiritual and moral forces stepped outside the pale of the Church and fulminated attacks on Her loyalty to Christ's teaching. Good people, hungry for Christ's word, His true teaching, sought earnestly for it in the pages of Scripture rather than in the words from Rome, Avignon, or Pisa.

⁸ Joseph McSorley, An Outline History of the Church by Centuries, (London, 1946), pp. 443-444.

Spearheading the attack outside the walls of Roman Catholicism was the "determined foe of wealthy churchmen,"⁹ John Wyclif.¹⁰ His history and doctrine are of importance in a complete study of Chaucer's attitude toward the Church.

It is unlikely that the celebrated reformer was born much after 1320. His birth date like very many other facts of his life is subject to great controversy. Rather young, he journeyed from Ipreswel, his birthplace, to Oxford where he received his university education.

After about four years the scholar would "determine", at the age perhaps of seventeen or eighteen; three years of further study would enable him to "incept", in other words, to become a Master of Arts. Beyond this stage no Fellow of Balliol could proceed, since. Fellows should apply themselves exclusively to the liberal arts. The study of theology was thus prohibited to them, at least so far as it led to a degree in that faculty. In 1340 however a new endowment established six theological fellowships, the holders of which were bound to incept in divinity within thirteen years.

Under these conditions probably Wycliffe resided at Balliol until he was elected Master, some time after 1356, but not later than 1360.¹¹

9 Ibid., 453.

10 The surname has over twenty different spellings. Although spellings in later quotations will vary, this spelling will be adopted for the text.

11 Reginald Land Poole, Wycliffe and Movements for Reform (New York, 1888), p. 64.

In 1365, Pope Urban V made the step of a formal demand on King Edward III for tribute to the Holy See which was promised by King John, and which had not been paid to the Holy See for the past thirty years. King Edward laid the Pope's order before his Parliament in May 1366. Unanimously the Parliament declared that King John had no authority to subject the country to papal jurisdiction. There would be no tribute paid to Pope Urban, and King Edward would not answer the summons to the Papal throne.¹²

This historical situation is significant in the life of Wyclif, for it put the reformer in a position of influence at the royal Court. His position, however, hardly seems as great as Ten Brink would have it:

An anonymous pamphlet soon appeared, in which the most determined supporters of the papal authority must have found their views expressed with sufficient clearness. The absolute exemption of the clergy from the civil jurisdiction was here boldly asserted, as well as the absolute independence of Church possessions from secular control. On the other hand, the authority of the king of England was made dependent on the conditions and tribute promised by John and the investiture conferred by the Pope.

The author of the pamphlet styled himself a Monk and Doctor of Theology; and, in his confidence of victory, he challenged one of the foremost scholars in the opposite camp to come forth and refute his statements. This scholar was henceforth raised from a quiet and comparatively humble sphere of life to the arena of the battles of the age, and on him the full

¹² Ibid., pp. 65-69.

light of history was ever afterwards to beat. This scholar was John Wyclif: it was he who brought the political and religious tendencies of the age into the closest and most fruitful connection with the growth of the national language and literature of England.¹³

Wyclif's refutation was cleverly written in the form of a piece of Parliamentary debate, in which "seven different lords state in succession their opinions of the pretensions of Urban V. The question is thus ventilated from all sides, and the antagonist is almost crushed under the weight of the arguments, which are very different in kind, but all directed to the same end."¹⁴

The years from 1370 to 1380 showed Wyclif's radical change from being merely a learned theologian, philosopher, and writer to that of a radical reformer. As at least one writer maintains, he was examining questions which "shook the heart of the entire century."¹⁵

In his three volumes of Select English Works of John Wyclif, Thomas Arnold gives to readers the authentic text of Wyclif's beliefs. Here one may read at great length and in the original Middle English what the fiery heretical author and orator presents in argument against Catholic truths such as the following: the practice of private (oral) confession (II, 87,

13 Ten Brink, p. 5.

14 Ibid., pp. 7-8.

15 Ibid., p. 12

148-149; III, 461-462), the belief that Christ is physically present in the Eucharist (II, 110-113, 169-170; III, 500-503), the command of bishops against the "poor priests" preaching without ecclesiastical permission (II, 173), the observance of the Sabbath (II, 180), the claim of many Popes who have claimed equality with Peter (II, 284), the infallibility of the Pope, i.e., in so far as he says that Popes and cardinals are often at fault in their judgments (II, 231), the distinction between mortal and venial sin (III, 452), the Church as the source of truth (III, 447-448), the binding power of a papal or episcopal anathema (III, 465), the Pope's power to canonize (III, 467), the acceptance of Mass stipends (III, 473), and the possession of private property and temporal possessions by clerics (III, 473-475).

Wyclif's Summa in Theologia stresses the idea of "dominion" and the inseparably connected notion of possession. The sympathetic Poole explains the reformer's important theory on possession:

He begins the book¹⁶ with the proposition that no one in mortal sin has any right to any gift of God, while on the other hand every man standing in grace has not only the right to, but has in fact, every gift of God. He takes literally the aphorism which an old

16 The reference is to De Dominio Divino, a major work of Wyclif which appears in the Summa in Theologia.

tradition inserted in the Book of Proverbs, The faithful man hath the whole world of riches, but the unfaithful hath not even a farthing; and he supports it with much fullness and ingenuity of argumentation. The first part of the thesis is indeed a legitimate following out of the doctrine which Saint Augustin had enforced, of the negative character of evil. Sin, he said, is nothing, and men, when they sin, become nothing; if then, argued Wycliffe, sinners, as such, are nothing, then it is evident that they can possess nothing. Moreover, possession presupposes a right or title to possess; and this right or title can only be held ultimately to depend upon the good pleasure of God, who plainly cannot be thought to approve the lordship of the wicked or the manner in which they abuse their power. Again, by the common law an inferior lord may not alienate real property without the license of his lord-in-chief and any grant in contravention of his will is wrongful; accordingly, as God is the lord-in-chief of all human beings, it should appear that any grant made to a sinner must be contrary to his will, and thus be no real or proper possession at all. But even granting that the sinner can have such possession, all lordship is conferred by God on the consideration of a man's returning to him continually due service: when however a man falls into mortal sin he defrauds his lord-in-chief of this service, and thus rightfully incurs forfeiture and is deprived of all lordship whatsoever.¹⁷

The passage above was quoted at length because it reveals the basic trend of Wyclif's thinking, namely, the trend to exaggerated individualism. It also is an excellent example of his manner of reasoning.

In the Summa, Wyclif then treats man's dominion in the

¹⁷ Poole, pp. 89-90.

state of innocence, man's dominion over nature, the truth of Holy Scripture, the Church and the State, the Power of the Pope, and finally because these were the chief evils from which the Church was then suffering at that time, he treats the sins of simony, apostasy, and blasphemy. Wyclif traces back all power and authority to God Who alone is absolute and unlimited. No temporal dominion, temporal possession, nor spiritual authority is absolute or unlimited. He considers the Church as "the company of God's elect."¹⁸ He insists that every Christian should be a theologian and a lawyer, that parishioners should censure an unfaithful and unprincipled pastor or else be an abetter in his sin, and that there is little difference between clergyman and layman or priests and bishop.

In his attack against Wyclif and the early Lollards -- the name given to Wyclif's followers--Thomas Netter of Walden summarized ten Wycliffite doctrines or contentions as follows:

1. That whatever the Pope or the Church says is to be condemned if they do not prove it from Holy Scripture.
2. That Holy Scripture is the sole rule of faith, and whatever the Church at large or the Fathers have taught is to be despised, even what holy Councils have decreed.
3. The Wycliffites despise not only the teachings of holy doctors, but declare that their expositions are to be rejected, after the example of Wycliffe, who

¹⁸ Ten Brink, p. 13.

said that all holy Fathers since the first millennium were in error.

4. The Wycliffites set themselves up as far more learned than bishops and other Catholics; that so when they are openly vanquished, they may escape and make the orthodox vile in comparison with themselves.

5. They preach that Catholic doctors are incapable of understanding Wycliffe's doctrines.

6. They praise greatly Wycliffe's books that they may provoke the orthodox to read them.

7. They affect piety, declaim against vices, and inculcate the divine Scripture that they may the more skilfully deceive the simple-minded.

8. They adjust not only their words but their morals also to the end that they may seduce others by an opinion of their good life.

9. After the fashion of early heretics they prate against Catholics, insinuating that they do not understand the sayings of Wycliffe; but they recite them falsely, or they rashly attribute to him things which he did not say.

10. They excuse their master, Wycliffe, alleging that he retracted several things before his death, and altered some, and that Catholic writers are silent about certain points, and show up certain things in hatred of him.¹⁹

Thomas Netter's list is far more interesting than his refutation, for the list gives a brief, accurate picture of the early Lollards; whereas, his own argumentation is far less succinct. The list, however, is incomplete. It fails to mention other heretical doctrines which must be included. In all, there were forty-five errors of John Wyclif which were condemned by the Council of Constance on May 4, 1415, thirty one years after the

¹⁹ James Gairdner, C.B., Lollardy and the Reformation in England (London, 1908), pp. 190-191.

reformer's death and only fifteen years after Chaucer's. Pertinent among these false opinions were:

1. Substantia panis materialis et similiter substantia vini materialis remanent in sacramento altaris.

2. Accidentia panis non manent sine subjecto in eodem sacramento.

3. Christus non est in eodem sacramento identice et realiter (in) propria praesentia corporali.

4. Si episcopus vel sacerdos existat in peccato mortali, non ordinat, non consecrat, non conficit, non baptizat.

7. Si homo fuerit debite contritus, omnis confessio exterior est sibi superflua et inutilis.

8. Si Papa sit praescitus et malus, et per consequens membrum diaboli, non habet potestatem super fideles sibi ab aliquo datam, nisi forte a Caesare.

10. Contra Scripturam sacram est, quod viri ecclesiastici habeant possessiones.

11. Nullus praelatus debet aliquem excommunicare, nisi prius sciat eum excommunicatum a Deo: et qui sic excommunicat, fit ex haereticus vel excommunicatus.

37. Ecclesia Romana est synagoga satanae, nec Papa est proximus et immediatus vicarius Christi et Apostolorum.²⁰

Historically between Chaucer and Wyclif stands a middle man, John of Gaunt. Just as the Duke of Lancaster had an interest in the poet for his literary ability, so had he an interest in the radical reformer--but not for his religious convictions and sincerity. Even Poole admits that Wyclif was a little too simple for

²⁰ Henricus Denzinger, Enchiridion Symbolorum (Freiburg, 1938), pp. 241-243.

the likes of Gaunt. "He was regarded as the Duke's tool, and was attacked as such."²¹ Kemp Malone has this to say regarding the relationship between the middle man and Wyclif:

But John of Gaunt was a politician, not a reformer. He found Wyclif useful in the dispute with Pope Gregory XI over the tribute which King John had obligated England to pay to the popes but which the popes had long been unable to collect. Here Wyclif's views about clerical poverty, and his belief that the Church should not concern herself with worldly matters, made him just the man to represent the Crown in opposing the papal claims. But when he called both the rival popes of the great schism anti-Christ he showed himself to be hopelessly unpolitical, and other utterances of his that smacked of what would later be called Protestantism lost him the backing of John of Gaunt and at last even of his university, which stood behind him as long as safety permitted.²²

About the time when Gaunt had found use for Wyclif, the love-poet Geoffrey Chaucer, offered to the same Duke the "romantic Book of the Duchess, a work of high literary quality in which "the knight is the very idealized John of Gaunt, and the poem presents his relationship to Blanche as conforming in every detail to the current romantic conception of Knight and lady."²³

That Chaucer and Wyclif ever met face to face might well

²¹ Poole, p. 77

²² Kemp Malone, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore, 1951) pp. 12-13.

²³ Marchette Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer of England (New York, 1946), p. 93.

be true, although such a meeting seems to have escaped the notice of all historians and commentators. Yet, even if there were such a meeting, it is not surprising that the acquaintance goes unnoticed, for in temperament alone, carefree Chaucer and resolute Wyclif stand poles apart.

The work of this chapter is accomplished. The causes which diminished the inner strength of the Church are before the reader. Outside attacks in the persons of Wyclif and the Lollards have been mentioned. The next chapter is devoted to Chaucer's significant portrayal of Church representatives. Here the Poet, by means of his art, will open the window upon fourteenth-century living.

CHAUCEY'S PORTRAYAL
OF FOURTEENTH-CENTURY CHURCHMEN

"But this method of opening a window upon life and letting the reader see the persons and events of the writer's vision is habitual with Chaucer. And this is the reason why his satire is so convincing. He does not argue, and there is no opportunity for reply. He merely lets us see his fools and rascals in their native foolishness and rascality, and we necessarily think of them as he would have us think."¹

In the former chapter many historical documents and accounts of the times were presented. Those same truths now appear in the flesh and blood of unworthy churchmen. Chaucer's portrayal of fourteenth-century churchmen is also his portrayal of the fourteenth-century Church. This and the following chapter will be of extraordinary importance in understanding Chaucer's attitude toward the Church. The concern now is with personages

¹ John Matthews Manly, Some New Light On Chaucer (New York, 1926), p.295 .

and character traits rather than with dates, groups in opposition, and general movements. Particularized as these five principal representatives of the Church seem to be, they mirror the Church so realistically that the reader feels present in the fourteenth century.

There are two general types of clergymen presented in the Canterbury Tales. One type--the matter for this chapter--is well represented in the persons of the Monk, the Friar, the Pardoner, and the Summoner; the other--the matter for the following chapter--in the sole person of the Poor Parson. All are formal representatives of the Church. It is true that the Church expresses Herself in the persons like the perfect Knight, but more pronouncedly and more directly are Church conditions mirrored in the five principal churchmen just mentioned.

The first consideration will be to present each of these churchmen as Chaucer portrays them. The first four are taken together because they actually form one type of churchmen. From Chaucer's description of each, the same conclusions are derived, i.e., that the abuses of the time are not due to the intrinsic nature of Mother Church's doctrine, but to the irresponsibility of Her servants. There is never present in the whole treatment of these unworthy church representatives the slightest question as to the doctrine which they failed to preach.

Since Chaucer writes with irony, the reader must at times read between the lines. But the conclusions stand as valid as the reasons also advanced. After the descriptions, certain texts will be cited with the hope that the basic distinction between the Church's Divine Authority and her servants human frailty will be recognized. Other texts will illustrate--even in spite of Chaucer's wit--the position of authority which the Pope and Rome in general held in the minds and hearts of fourteenth-century Englishmen.

The Monk

Chaucer depicts the Monk in such a manner that his independent spirit becomes immediately evident. As an outrider, he had the privilege to go about the countryside on the business of the order; and, of course there was little room for objection when he travelled with the blessing of his religious superior. Muriel Bowden, however, cites the danger of such "outside business" for a Monk when she points out:

The disciplinarians of the Middle Ages all insisted that two of the most important stays to the principles of the monastic Rule are labour and claustration. . . . St. Benedict's famous Rule (early sixth century) states: "Idleness is an enemy of the soul. Because this is so, brethren ought to be occupied at specific times in manual labour. The monastery . . . itself ought, if possible, to be so constructed as to contain within it all necessities . . . so that there be no occasion for monks to wander abroad, since this is in no wise expedient for their souls: We wish this Rule to be read frequently in the community so that no brother

may plead ignorance as an excuse."²

Chaucer's Monk fell victim to this "outside business."

Chaucer says that the Monk is "reccheles."³ This word is well discussed by Emerson who states that it follows in meaning the Old English "receleas" which refers to "one who violates his duty."⁴ The parenthetical remark in the following lines leaves no question as to the meaning of the word in the mind of Chaucer:

Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees,--
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.⁵

The Monk is of such a disposition as to shun Saint Benedict's Rule which demands that he perform hard manual labors and devote himself to study. He justifies his disposition with the words:

What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!⁶

2 Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1949), p.108.

3 Gen. Prol., 179, Complete Works, p.21.

4 Oliver Farrar Emerson, "Some of Chaucer's Lines on the Monk," MP, I, 105-115, in Bowden, p. 116.

5 Gen. Prol., 180-181, Complete Works, p. 21.

6 Ibid., 184-188.

The Rule also called for ordinary monastic garb, but:

I seigh his sleeves purfiled at the hond
With grys, and that the fyneste of a lond;
And, for to festne his hood under his chyn,
He hadde of gold ywroght a full curious pyn:
A love-knotte in the gretter ende ther was.⁷

And: "His bootes souple, his hors in greet estat."8

In a word, the Monk found his Rule "old and somdel streit."⁹ Harry Bailly's apt remark to the Monk gives us a brief and complete character impression of him. The Host bluntly asserts:

I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun
That first thee broughte unto religioun!
Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright
Haddestow as greet a leeve, as thou hast
myght,
To parfourne al thy lust in engendrure,
Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature.¹⁰

For his story, the Monk avoids mention of his adventures when hunting, and rather settles on a quick account of sixteen tragedies. The century-old stories about the rise and fall of Lucifer, Adam, Sampson, Hercules, the proud Nebuchadnezzar, the idolatrous Belshazzar, the strong-fighting Zenobia, the ruthless Nero, the conquering Alexander, the powerful Caesar, and the

7 Ibid.., 193-197

8 Ibid.., 203.

9 Ibid.., 174.

10 Monk's Prol.., 3133-3138, Ibid.., p. 225.

wealthy Croesus are tales with only one moral to them: the great of this world are helpless before the crushing hand of Fortune. In each of the lives of these personages is written a message similar to Belshazzar's: "Mene, techel, phares."¹¹

As might be expected, the vast difference between the worldly Monk of the Prologue, and the gloomy Monk who tells these tragedies has given rise to many conjectures among interpreters. Manly notes the difference when he writes:

As to the Monk, although Chaucer, completely threw over the one described in the Prologue and substituted for him a gloomy and uninteresting person who retains nothing of the original brilliant figure except the horse with its jingling bells, he seems to me real--drawn from a living model. Perhaps he was too real. Perhaps he or some powerful friend of his read the sketch in the Prologue and suggested to Chaucer that it was unmistakable and undesired.¹²

But this is just an opinion. Perhaps more adequately does Mr. Thomas Savage, S.J., explain the complete change in the Monk when he calls attention to Chaucer's artistic purpose: "An ironic situation arises in the monk's tale, the main subject of which is the tragic fall of such great men as Satan, Adam, and Samson. All these were undone and fell from their lofty state for one reason or another, but primarily because they were proud

11 Ibid., 3396, p.229.

12 Manly, p. 262.

men. Consider the irony of a Monk, whose obvious moral fault is pride, preaching a tale whose moral is the fall of proud men."¹³

This consideration indicates a single character in Chaucer's mind even though such striking differences occur between the Monk of the Prologue and the Monk who recounts these tragic stories. It is obvious that the Monk's tale has a "litel hevyness"¹⁴ and "anoyeth al this compaigny";¹⁵ and secondly that a gayly dressed Monk of the Prologue would rather be one to relate a wild adventure of his, such as the Host requests at the end of the tale with: "Sir, sey somewhat of huntynge, I yow preye."¹⁶ But the Monk makes it clear that he has no desire to do so, and considers his contribution complete.

It is curious that the Monk should maintain this new attitude. Yet, if the Monk has been listening to some ribald stories from the Miller and the Reeve, as well as the tales of the humble, generous Knight and the simple, but too refined Prioress, then there is good reason to expect considerable modification of his worldly attitude. Would that all the other

¹³ Thomas G. Savage, S. J., The Various Functions of Irony in Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Parson's Tale' (West Baden, 1953) p. 70.

¹⁴ Nun's Pr. Prol., 3959, Complete Works, p.237.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2789.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2805.

men of the Church had this same strong underlying sense of dignity in their hearts! Chaucer's Monk certainly enjoys his pastime excessively. He undoubtedly shows more interest in the "grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight,"¹⁷ than in the holy Rule and monastic discipline. But all in all he has some sincerity and lives out the Pauline dictum: "For the good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do."¹⁸

Careful interpretation of certain lines will readily lead the reader to see Chaucer's disapproval of the Monk's general conduct. The line: "Now certainly he was a fair prelaat"¹⁹ is obviously written with a tone of irony; and Chaucer's whole description is one of pride and sensuality which is contrasted against the strict monastic Rule. Were the Monk to stand alone as representative of England's fourteenth-century Church, our picture of the Church would not be a complete one. But side by side with the other religious and clerics, the Monk is an able representative of a particular group of fourteenth-century religious who, though intellectually inquisitive by nature, were at the same time weak-willed and irresolute in their austere

17 Gen. Prol., 190, Ibid., p. 21.

18 I Romans, VII. 19

19 Gen. Prol., 204, Complete Works, p. 21.

vocation. Theirs was an abuse which imperceptibly weakened the Catholic Church of England. It is evident that their mediocrity did not escape the keen eye of their contemporary satirist.

The Friar and the Summoner

These representatives are treated together principally because of the feud which existed between them. With only a quick glance at the two characters, both may appear as equally ugly. However, as Muriel Bowden affirms: Brother Hubert's "blackness fades to grey beside the Summoner's."²⁰

Brother Hubert is the Friar who devotes himself to active service of the Church and lacks the safeguard which, it would seem, somewhat fortified the Monk: occasional prayerful contemplation. The Friar's whole outlook on life is sinful; just the opposite of the great Saint Francis who preceded him by two centuries. Francis wanted to live like Christ: "And, indeed, the earliest Rule of Saint Francis was comprehended in three brief sentences: 'If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all that thou hast and give to the poor'; 'Take nothing for your journey'; and 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.'"²¹

20 Bowden, p. 269.

21 Ibid., p. 121.

With his rich clothes, his curiosity for the latest secular matters, his neglect of the poor and even his hatred of them, and his familiar acquaintance with women in every town in which he visited, the Friar stands as a perfect example of what he should not have been. The story which he tells is a vivid description of a Summoner who goes about satisfying his base desires and accusing innocent persons of heinous crimes in order to collect money. The whole purpose of the tale is to ridicule the Summoner who is also making the journey to Canterbury. With intense satisfaction, he identifies the Summoner in the story with Satan and prays God that all be protected from such villains.

Of course the Summoner, not to be outdone, takes up this vicious sarcasm with his own vulgar account of a Friar's routine work. The narrative is every bit as disgusting as his scabby brows, white pimples, and garlic breath.

Certainly Chaucer hated the Friar's unscrupulous cupidity:

Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous.
 He was the beste beggere in his hous;
 And yaf a certeyn ferme for the graunt;
 Noon of his bretheren cam ther in his haunt;
 For thogh a wydwe hadde noght a sho,
 So pleasaunt was his "In principio,"
 Yet wolde he have a ferthyng, er he went,
 And rage he koude, as it were right a whelp.²²

22 Gen. Prol., 251-257, Complete Works, pp. 21-22.

But of the Summoner's wretchedness Chaucer speaks with even greater and more disgusted sarcasm:

He was a gentil harlot and a kynde;
 A bettre felawe sholde men noght fynde.
 He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn
 A good felawe to have his concubyn
 A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle;
 Ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle.²³

The last line means that the Summoner also had a concubine.

The Friar is devout before the wealthy women in the towns he visits. His tippet was filled with knives, pins, and other attractive presents which he bestowed with ostentation on grateful ladies. Add an occasional song on his rote to his constant flattery and the worldly self-seeking of this representative of the Church is clearly recognized.

The Summoner, whose fiery-red, cherubic face always terrified children, sought constantly for recognition among crowds. His casual use of Latin phrases which were utterly meaningless to him, was a means toward winning awe from his hearers. His promise to return the discourtesy of the Friar when his turn to tell a tale would come, unveils his selfish, revengeful heart.

23 Ibid., 647-652, p. 26.

The very fact that the two so-called religious men engaged in a quarrel so similar to the Miller's and the Reeve's, and that they stoop to the vulgarity of the latter pair is an excellent indication of the degenerate spirit of the representatives of the Church. Even when properly interpreted in the light of fourteenth-century attitudes of mind, the vulgarity of these tales is inexcusable. True, the vulgarity does not violate morals, but it is a violation of custom or manners. As Professor Lawrence insists:

It must be especially emphasized, as I have already suggested, that such avoidance of vulgarity was a matter, not of morals, but of manners. In our own times, frank descriptions or representations of the sexual functions have been frowned upon, as exercising a stimulating and unhealthy influence upon the imagination though we have been getting bravely over this in recent years. In the Middle Ages physiological processes were taken very frankly. Sex had few reticences; it was not paraded, but was accepted with no blushes as a part of normal human life. The same was true of the excretory functions.²⁴

Both the Friar and the Summoner, then, with all their hate, vulgarity, hypocrisy, and sinfulness are proto-types, in Chaucer's mind, of religious reprobates who were a natural consequence of the weaknesses prevalent in the Church at that time. His attention is centered on these creations of his own artistic genius, on their trifling skirmishes, and on their terrible vices.

²⁴ William Witherle Lawrence, Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales (London, 1950), p.73.

His satire lies in his knowledge of what they are and what they ought to be.

The Pardoner

If one is in search of Chaucer's explicit condemnation of certain Church representatives, he need look no farther than the boastful, vulgar, unscrupulous, and hypocritical Pardoner of Rouncival. Where the Friar was a vicious enemy of the Summoner, the Pardoner might be called his vicious friend. Chaucer has delineated in this so-called representative of Rome an opportunist who saw the weaknesses of the Church and with extraordinary cleverness used that weakness for his own gain. His tale to the fellow travellers is without reserve a full confession of the vast success he has enjoyed at the expense of the simple folk who profess their love of Church authority.

His abiding principle repeatedly is proclaimed by that loud, goat voice: Radix Malorum Est Cupiditas! When he preaches, behind him hang large parchments and shiny seals. He shows devotion, spouts Latin, and decries the vicious sins of gluttony and avarice. From his wallet he takes seemingly precious relics, and affirms their powerful efficacy in the hands of the friends of God. His whole purpose in moving their hearts is to move their hands into their purses.

For the travellers, he offers as his tale a typical

Medieval illustrative sermon, an exemplum. It is the swift-moving story of "Death and the Three Revellers." Following upon it, the Pardoner gives a long denunciation of drunkenness and games of chance. And with a touch of exquisite sarcasm, Chaucer has him swirl a bit with his drink and completely forget his place. It slipped his mind that he previously confessed the precious "relics" of saints which he carried to be merely pigs' bones. When he boldly proceeds to sell these same "relics" to the travellers, violent ill-feeling expresses itself in the Host, who speaks trenchantly.

The details which Chaucer gives his readers about the Pardoner show strong indications of the author's personal opinion of such a hypocrite. Before his story, the Pardoner briefly paints a typical scene where he is preaching. "Death and the Three Revellers" is his sermon, a fascinating tale on the evil results of avarice. But the Pardoner himself obviously loves money; and Chaucer's irony is vivid. The tale was substituted in place of a filthy, witty story originally planned to lighten the heart of Harry Bailly after the Physician's tale on Virginia. But the group as a whole wanted a story with a moral. The Pardoner, therefore, attempted immediately to fulfill their request. The very same man was perfectly content to tell a filthy story or a very inspiring one. Chaucer's irony is again vivid.

Phrases such as:

O womb, O bely! O stinking cod,
Fulfilled of donge and of corrupcioun²⁵

are so strikingly incongruous with the speaker who drinks and stuffs himself! But the culmination of Chaucer's irony comes at the point in the story where the Pardoner forgets his place and begins to sell his "relics." Being a fool of fools, he first approaches the Host. Professor Root aptly refers to this moment in the Pardoner's Tale when he writes: "The sublime audacity of the Pardoner, however, is reserved till the end of the tale, when in the glow of his oratory he offers his worthless relics to the very company to whom he has made an expose of his lying methods. I hardly think that he expected to win their silver; as we have seen, he is on a vacation. It is rather the conscious artist in hypocrisy, who wishes to give a crowning example of his art."²⁶ And behind that art is the true mind of Chaucer toward the Pardoner and his kind.

All four churchmen are unworthy of their office. But where in the accounts lies any direct attack against the basic nature of the organization which these men represented or preten-

25 Pard. Tale, 534-535. Complete Works, p. 182.

26 Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1922), p. 231.

ded to represent? On the contrary, there is every indication that the dignity of the office which these men have assumed is abused because of their human frailty. It is by knowing what they ought to be that Chaucer fully realizes what they are. Not only Chaucer, but even his imaginary characters give evidence that they realize what they ought to be. There are at least two striking instances. In the case of the Monk, we have a man who in the course of the journey came to realize the pride and tepidity of his own life. At the close of his tale, his refusal to relate a narrative on hunting, together with his encouragement that others speak as he has spoken, prompts the Chaucerian reader to note a sense of shame and regret in the Monk. The Monk has not been loyal to his high office.

Even the vicious Pardoner, a master of hypocrisy, knew what he ought to have been in such an office of trust. Gerould describes and explains:

Then his [the Pardoner's] intoxication, whether with ale or with his own acting, appears suddenly to end. "And lo, sires, thus I preche," he says flatly, and goes on in three lines (916-918) to speak for the first time like an honest man. "And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche, / So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve / For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve." These are words of truth and soberness, and puzzling words to be spoken by the Pardoner as he has revealed himself. In spite of their difficulty, however, we should be unwise to assume that they are "out of character." The Pardoner is Chaucer's creation, and everyone recognizes him to be a very great fictional

creation. His unexpected and momentary exhibition of decency must be accepted without reserve, since his author attributed it to him. We may speculate as much as we please about this white spot on his cloak of infamy, but we cannot escape it. Just there, briefly, the Pardoner showed that he knew the difference between good and evil, between truth and falsehood. One may guess that Chaucer put the words in his mouth because he meant him to be a human being. He was a very wicked man, but no devil.²⁷

When Chaucer writes the line: "Lat Austin have his swynk to hym reserved,"²⁸ he puts the Monk in a position apart from the great "Austin." In effect, the Poet is approving the great Rule of Saint Augustine and (with customary irony) censuring the Monk for his irresponsible outlook. Chaucer, therefore, reveals his faith in the spiritual effectiveness of the monastic Rule and blames the Monk for failing to comply with the time-honored customs of Catholic Monasticism. Harry Bailly's glib remark to the Monk also indicates Chaucer's recognition of the high spiritual criteria sought for by the Church in her monastic schools:

I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun
That first thee broghte unto religioun!²⁹

27 Gordon Hall Gerould, Chaucerian Essays (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952), p. 70.

28 Gen. Prol., 188, Complete Works, p. 21

29 Monk's Prol., 3133-3134, Ibid., p. 225.

Certain casual remarks concerning "the Pope" are made in the descriptions of these four unworthy churchmen. Chaucer, for example, makes mention of the Summoner as wasting his training and speaking like a parrot without comprehending. But notice the way he puts it:

A few termes hadde he, two or thre,
That he had lerned out of som decree--
No wonder is, he herde it al the day;
And eek ye knowen wel how that a jay
Kan clepen "Watte" as wel as kan the pope.³⁰

At first glance, the last two lines sound disrespectful. But their irreverent tone vanishes, for the man of Medieval England spoke more freely of God and his representatives. The Church played a great role in his life.³¹ Besides, the obvious contrast between the "jay" and the "pope" drives home the difference between what is feigned as authentic and what is truly so. If anything, in the last line of the quotation Chaucer affirms the Pope as the authority; whereas, the jay and the Summoner are a poor facsimile.

Another occasion where--although again surrounded with witty words--the authority of the Pope is asserted is the lines of the Host to the Monk:

30 Gen. Prol., 639-643, Ibid., p. 26.

31 Cf. quotation on p.7.

God yeve me sorwe, and I were a pope,
 Nat oonly thou, but every myghty man,
 Though he were shorn ful upon his pan,
 Sholde have a wyf; for al the world is lorn!³²

Even in the humor of the statement, the Pope is the possessor of authority.

An occasion for Chaucer to degrade the Pope would have been the Monk's Tale. The great moral is that all men are helpless before Fortune's hand. Although Chaucer does include mention of "popes" in the introductory matter to the tale, there is no actual story concerning the Pope. Even when he mentions "popes," it is not with reference to their subjection to Fortune, but rather in an apologetic fashion that the Monk's order of personages in the tale might not be according to dignity. The personage of the Pope never follows in the tale.

Authority, power, even public censure are recognized as from Rome, notwithstanding the irony of Chaucer. This is particularly noted in the account of the Pardoner:

His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe,
 Bretful of pardoun, comen from Rome al hoot.³³

And the lines:

32 Monk's Tale, 3140-3143, Complete Works, p. 225.

33 Gen. Prol., 686-687, Ibid., p. 27.

Bulles of popes and of cardynales,
Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe.³⁴

And finally the reference:

And I assoille him by the auctoritee
Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me.³⁵

Whether the Pardoner speaks about authentic bulls or not, Rome is always recognized as the home of authority. There is not the slightest evidence that Chaucer would wish to transfer this authority to another place nor would desire to restrict that authority exclusively to Scripture.

Father Connolly, when referring to unlicensed Pardoners (and indirectly to other clerical imposters and renegades), gives us the final action of the Church on these reprobates. The particular document which will be quoted was issued a century and a half after Chaucer's death. In view of the history of the times, the delay is quite explainable. The abolishment is assured, for: "Then when Pius IV was Pope, their death-knell was finally sounded in the Twenty-first Session of the Council of Trent, July 16, 1562. 'No further hope can be entertained of emending elemosynarum quaestores,' and therefore, 'the use of them and their name are entirely abolished henceforth in Christendom' (Ninth

34 Pard. Prol., 342-343, Ibid., p. 179.

35 Ibid., 387-388, p. 180.

Chapter of the Decree of Reform)."³⁶

In this chapter has been outlined Chaucer's portrayal of one type of Churchmen: the sinful, irresponsible, weak "servants of God." Each one has the same message of degradation --some to a greater, some to a lesser degree. Each one spells out the wretched effects of schism, revolt, war, and plague. Contrary to the general attitude of Protestant critics, who are cited in the next chapter, the poet of love and religion is unquestionably orthodox in his treatment. It remains to follow Chaucer's lead as the Poet with the highest admiration directs the attention of his readers toward the Poor Parson of a Town. Who is this man who is privileged to close the Canterbury Tales? Who is this man who is selected to prepare the souls of all the travellers?

³⁶ Terence L. Connolly, S.J., An Introduction to Chaucer and Langland (New York, 1925), p. 56.

CHAPTER IV

CHAUCER'S PORTRAYAL OF THE PARSON

With a sigh of relief, Chaucer's reader turns from the previous four churchmen to the "povre Persoun of a Toun."¹ Chaucer's Parson represents the second type of churchmen in the Canterbury Tales. By a proportion of four churchmen to one, the Parson and his kind are in the minority. He is considerably unlike the religious characters so far presented. Regarding the other principal churchmen, Chaucer decried their vices. Regarding this man, Chaucer seems to take great pride in presenting him as a true shepherd, holy and virtuous.

A good man was ther of religioun
And was a povre Persoun of a Toun,
But rich he was of hooly thought and werk,
He was also a lerned man, a clerk,
That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;
His parissshens devoutly wolde he teche.²

His good example, his firmness, gentleness, devotion, conscientiousness toward all of his flock whether rich or poor,

1 Gen. Prol., 478, Complete Works, p. 24.

2 Ibid., 477-482.

his cheerfulness, honesty, simplicity, poverty, chastity, reverence, and prayerfulness--all these and even other virtues adorn the quiet and humble Parson. Chaucer mentions his impartiality:

But it were any persone obstinat,
What so he were, of heigh or lough estat,
Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys.³

There is indirect mention of his kindness and love of poverty:

"Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes;"⁴ and direct mention of his practical generosity:

But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,
Unto his povre parissshens aboute
Of his offfryng and eek of his substaunce.⁵

Chaucer depicts him with undaunted devotion:

Wyd was his parisshe, and houses fer asonder,
But he ne lefte nat, for reyn ne thonder,
In siknesse nor in meschief to visite
The ferreste in his parisshe, muche and lite,
Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf.⁶

And his strong faithfulness to his flock stands true in spite of the other priests who run to London's great Saint Paul's in order to seek an easy living, "a chaunterie for soules."⁷

3 Ibid., 521-523, p.25.

4 Ibid., 486, p. 24.

5 Ibid., 487-489.

6 Ibid., 491-495.

7 Ibid., 510.

On this last point, Muriel Bowden amplifies:

Thus again Chaucer's Parson typifies the truly ideal parish priest. He does not run to "Londoun unto Seinte Poules" to answer the advertisement of some gild for a chaplain "to been witholden" (to be retained by the gild in a sinecure), but stays "at hoom" and guards his flock. Westlake⁸ declares that St. Paul's Cathedral or its precincts was a "regular meeting-place for wardens of gilds who desired to hire, or priests who desired to be engaged for duties such as wardens had to offer."⁹

The sincere praise of Chaucer stands out in lines like:

"A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys,"¹⁰ "Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne, /But in his techyng discreet. . . ,"¹¹ and ". . . Cristes loore . . . /He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe."¹²

For his tale, the last one presented on the pilgrimage to Canterbury, the Parson in a very abstract manner preaches the meaning and method of penance. His discourse includes the causes for contrition; the need, purpose, and value of confession; the

⁸ Reference is to H. F. Westlake, author of the Parish Gilds of Medieval England (London, 1919).

⁹ Bowden, pp. 236-237.

¹⁰ Gen. Prol., 524, Complete Works, p. 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 517-518.

¹² Ibid., 527-528.

seven capital sins and their remedies. Chaucer uses the tale "To knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende."¹³

In the Parson's Prologue, the reader learns that the only tale lacking toward the end of the pilgrim's journey to Canterbury is that of the Parson's. When Harry Bailly requests that the Parson relate the final tale, he insists on a story from the Parson in order to complete the game. Harry Bailly intended something on the cheerful side. The Parson very austere-ly replies: "Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me."¹⁴ Content to offer a sermon on the moral virtues, he warns them that they should not expect a highly alliterative, highly polished rendition. His goal in speaking is to convey truth. He promises his best effort, though he recognizes that his work will not exclude the possibility of errors. He is "nat textueel,"¹⁵ as he says, but shows humility:

I take but the sentence, trusteth weel.
Therefore I make a protestacioun.
That I wol stonde to correccioun.¹⁶

When all agree that the Parson's Tale (the title is a great mis-

13 Pars. Prol., 47, Ibid., p.272.

14 Ibid., 51.

15 Ibid., 57.

16 Ibid., 58-60.

nomer) is fitting for this moment as they approach the Martyr's Shrine, the Parson begins his sermon.

Considerable discussion about the authorship of the Parson's Tale is summarized for us by F. N. Robinson:

It's authorship has been much disputed, some critics denying it to Chaucer altogether, and others maintaining that it is heavily interpolated. Both style and subject-matter, in places, have been suspected as un-Chaucerian. According to one theory, developed in an elaborate essay by H. Simon, the original tale was a Wyclifite treatise, to which orthodox additions were made in the first decade of the fifteenth century. By other scholars, other methods have been used for detecting supposed interpolations. But, in spite of all their attacks, present opinion is decidedly in favor of the authenticity of the whole work.¹⁷

Robert Root and G. K. Chesterton also make valuable contributions to Robinson's conclusions. Root re-echoes Robinson when he writes:

So inartistic is this combination, that many critics, among them Ten Brink, have been unwilling to believe that the tale as preserved to us is Chaucer's authentic work. The whole digression on the seven deadly sins, and other lesser sections of the work, they regard as interpolations by another hand. But this method of higher criticism, by which everything offensive to the aesthetic taste of the critic is conveniently branded as interpolation, is fortunately going out of fashion; and in this particular case there is no adequate ground for supposing that the tale is not in all essentials as Chaucer wrote it.¹⁸

17 Complete Works, p.873

18 Root, p.287.

Root also mentions Professor Koepfel who has shown that many quotations from the section on the seven deadly sins occur in Chaucer's other works.¹⁹

G. K. Chesterton defends Chaucer's authorship of the Parson's Tale on the grounds that it is suitable to Chaucer's mind: "To anyone who knows what logic is, the sustained lucidity and consistency of the Parson's Tale is itself proof that writing it was, for Chaucer, not merely a moral toil, but an intellectual joy."²⁰

Sister Madeleva argues that Chaucer merely translated the Parson's Tale:

The treatise, in its matter, organization, and treatment, owes nothing, of course, to Chaucer except its English. Its Latin sources are generally stated; the author of the original as a compilation, if there was such a document, is not known. Its clear and methodical procedure through definition and division survives in countless books of catechetical instruction, from the catechism of the Council of Trent to the child's text today. Its plan, definitions, scriptural references, entire content, almost, are not and cannot be new. It is what may be called a standard study of penance. The style, wherever it can be, is something more than translation; for single, shining instances it is Chaucer.²¹

19 Ibid.

20 G. K. Chesterton, Chaucer (London, 1932), p. 260.

21 Sister M. Madeleva, A Lost Language and Other Essays on Chaucer (New York, 1951), pp. 72-73.

Sister Madeleva will agree that Chaucer, as a translator, did leave his mark upon the Parson's Tale. Chaucer himself knew what was in this tale; and, although he might have translated it years before, he still consciously ascribed its contents to the Parson. It was a fitting way to tie together the whole pilgrimage; there was nothing in the "translated sermon" contrary to his idealistic picture of Poor Parson. Therefore, regardless of certain difficulties which may arise over the source of the text, the text has met with Chaucer's approval and rightfully belongs to the Parson. Beyond a doubt then, Chaucer wants his Parson to say what is in the Parson's Tale. As Chaucer points to the Parson, he also points to the Parson's Tale, as a reading of the Parson's Prologue will make evident.

An exhortation to all sinners to follow the way called "penitence" is the introductory idea of the Tale. Penitence, then, is carefully defined according to the definitions of the Fathers of the Church. Baptism and confession are mentioned as deeds expected of a penitential man.

The Parson then proceeds to give a continual series of definitions and distinctions which deal ultimately with penitence, confession, and expiation. As one might expect, the Parson is extremely thorough in his abstract analysis--long winded, as many a reader might put it! The reader of Chaucer must follow the

speaker through the kinds of penitence, the three qualities of perfect penitence, the six causes which ought to move man to contrition, the two necessary qualities of a good contrition, confession, the nature and origin of sin, how sin is increased, definitions of mortal and venial sin, venial sins frequently overlooked, an exhortation on the Holy Eucharist to help eliminate venial sins, the use of holy water, the need to give alms, the value of the Confiteor and Compline, a complete and exhaustive account of the seven capital sins, their dependencies, circumstances, and species, together with the basic remedies to these vices, an insistence that confession or shrift is necessary for one who has sinned after Baptism and seeks salvation, the importance of shriving yourself lawfully, the value of receiving the Eucharist at least once a year, and finally the third part of penitence, expiation, which is achieved through almsgiving and bodily pain.²²

With this study of the Parson and his message to the travellers, we are in a position to ask the question prompted by Protestant readers of Chaucer: who is the Parson? The answers of

²² Certain illogicalities are in the Tale, e.g., the distinct division of penitence and expiation as substantially different, which is followed by a consideration of penitence as a genus of expiation. Chaucer may have translated two treatises, which had different manners of distinguishing. Still the subject matter is consistent and is ascribed by Chaucer to the Parson.

critics fall into two major divisions: the Parson is a Lollard; the Parson is not a Lollard, but an orthodox priest. In these replies, there often appear various nuances of thought which deserve our attention too.

Muriel Bowden, at first, seems to leave the question open. A closer reading of her well-worded statements shows her strong favoritism for the Parson as a Lollard: "There can be little doubt that Chaucer was influenced during the years 1380 to 1384, to say nothing of later years, by the teachings of Wyclif and his followers, the Lollards. The great reformer had entered the King's service some years before, while Chaucer was still a member of the Royal Household, and the impressionable poet may well have been moved by Wyclif's sincerity and eloquence."²³ Later, she continues: "Chaucer could hardly have been unaffected by such widespread interest among his friends in Wyclif's ideas. Certainly Chaucer shows clearly in the Canterbury Tales that his religious sympathies were with the Lollards to this extent: in general, he recognizes frankly and denounces by implication Church abuses of his time; and in particular, he invests his Parson, one of the most highly idealized of the company at the

23 Bowden, p. 9.

Tabard, with many of the characteristics of the Wyclifites."²⁴ Finally, she stresses in another section: "The question as to whether or not Chaucer's 'good man of religioun' is a Lollard is an interesting one We must bear in mind that many of Chaucer's friends were prominent Lollards, and that the poet himself had had every opportunity to develop an interest at least in Wyclif's ideas. Thus, in company with 'oure Hooste,' we may 'smelle a Lollere in the wynd,' and be almost certain that there is solid substance to give rise to the odour."²⁵

Muriel Bowden finds Professor Loomis' argumentation a help to her position: "Professor Loomis argues strongly in favor of the Parson's being one of Wyclif's adherents, though not, of course, one of Wyclif's 'poor priests.' He points out that Chaucer makes a triple reference to the Gospel and Christ's teaching in writing of the Parson, and this is Wyclifite emphasis; that Chaucer also uses the Lollard shibboleth, 'Christ and his apostles' in the Parson's portrait; that the Parson never denies the two direct accusations that he is a Lollard."²⁶

Doris V. Ives in an article entitled, "A Man of Religion,"

24 Ibid., p. 10.

25 Ibid., p. 238.

26 Ibid.

mentions a previous article of E. K. Maxfield which "points out that hitherto no exclusively Lollard trait has been found in the description of the Parson."²⁷ With great detail the article of Ives notes likenesses between the story of the Parson and the Lollard tracts, etc. For example, the term: "man of religion" is used in Lollard writings as a normal usage. Chaucer also makes use of it. She then proposes the question: "Why should Chaucer use this phrase which in Middle English works normally meant: 'a member of a religious order'?" The Parson was a secular priest."²⁸ In the article, an attempt is made not only to identify the Parson with some Lollard, but even with Wyclif himself:

The parson is a learned man unlike the average parson. He comes from a family of farmers (the ploughman is his brother) and has apparently been often in adversity; if Chaucer is referring to Wyclif, both these facts, which otherwise have little significance, are illuminating, for Wyclif's family and his career, both fit the case. It would of course, be absurd to stress the fact that Lutterworth was a wide parish "with houses fer asonder," but at least Chaucer's description does not invalidate the theory.

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It may be a point to add here that the Parson's dislike of "fables" is a part of the Lollard doctrine, and quite contrary to the normal practice of the orthodox sermon-writers of his day. Wyclif's sermons

27 Doris V. Ives, "A Man of Religion," MLR, XXVII (April 1932), 144.

28 Ibid.

are singularly free from all "exempla"

Wyclif protested "against the normal custom of 'cursing for tithes.'" There is no need to do more than refer to the numerous writs of signifi-cavit" to prove the frequency of the "cursing for tithes," and the singularity of Wyclif's attack on it. It was part of Wyclif's doctrine also that the priest should give of his superfluity to his poor parishioners.

The section on "confession" is unusually brief and indefinite, and accords with Wyclif's admission that "Confession maad to trewe prestis and witty in Goddis lawe, do moche good to synful men, so ad contriccioun for wyntnes before don come lerwi, and good lif and keping Goddis hestis and werkis of mercy don to pore men, sue after."²⁹

After several other notations similar to those just presented, a difficulty is offered, and in the mind of Doris Ives answered: "It has been objected that Chaucer would have seen the manifest absurdity of sending Wyclif on a pilgrimage to St. Thomas of Canterbury. It must be remembered that the Canterbury pilgrimage is, after all, only a literary device, and cannot, therefore, be stressed too heavily; moreover, we do not even know that the Parson was on pilgrimage. . . . The pilgrims themselves, at all events, seemed to think it quite possible that there was a 'Loller' among them."³⁰

29 Ibid., 145-147.

30 Ibid., 147-148.

Another prominent scholar of Chaucer who adheres tenaciously to Wycliffian tendencies in Chaucer is John S. P. Tatlock. In a lengthy article in Modern Philology, he considers Wyclif as the champion for the people against those who bring harm to them, as a champion of the state against the Church, as a champion of the secular clergy who were doing the essential work of the Church against those who interfered with them.³¹ Doctor Tatlock is convinced that Wyclif, his views, and his activities would have appealed to Chaucer, since both are interested in the essence of religion, progress of the state, deep sympathy for humanity, and a hatred for inconsistency and sham.³² "Further, it is hardly credible that he was not very familiar with Wyclif's views and even with the man himself, through his own friends. . . . If we find passages in the Canterbury Tales agreeing strikingly with certain of Wyclif's most emphatic opinions not often found elsewhere, it is an acceptable conjecture that Chaucer here shows his influence."³³

There are only two passages of Chaucer's considered at this time by Doctor Tatlock. The first is the famous line about

31 John S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer and Wyclif," MP, XIV (Sept. 1916), 66.

32 Ibid., 67.

33 Ibid.

"cursing for tithes," which Doris Ives used as a proof for her position. Doctor Tatlock argues similarly too. The second passage is in the description of the Summoner:

And if he foond owher a good felawe,
 He wolde techen him to have noon awe
 In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,
 But if a mannes soule were in his purs;
 For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.
 "Purs is the ercedekenes helle," seyde he.
 But wel I woot he lyed right in dede;
 Of cursying oghte ech gilty man him drede
 For curs wol slee right as assoillyng savith,
 And also war hym of a Significavit.³⁴

Doctor Tatlock, then, asks the question: "Who but a narrow and ill-informed ecclesiastic would say that an arch-deacon's ban for concubinage would slay a soul?"³⁵ He continues:

Our suspicion is confirmed by the last line. Significavit is the first word of the writ De Excommunicato Capiendo issued from the chancery at the request of the ordinary in the king's name, directing the sheriff to enforce justice against the culprit, which meant imprisoning, till he had been absolved, anyone who had been excommunicated for forty days with the major excommunication. The anti-climax, in a writer of Chaucer's sly subtlety, makes the meaning clear; however it may be with the eternal consequences of excommunication, we should look out for the temporal ones anyway. This throws us back once more to l. 661. Chaucer seems to speak lightly and skeptically of both excommunication and absolution. Both passages show an

34 Gen. Prol., 653-662, Complete Works, p. 26.

35 Tatlock, 69.

attitude of doubt toward the power of the keys as commonly understood in Chaucer's day.

On no subject does Wyclif express himself with more frequency and more intensity than on abuses which had grown up about the practice of excommunication.³⁶

The remaining portion of the article shows a striking resemblance between Chaucer and Wyclif in what they say. Both have an interest in predestination; both are curious about the relation between fortune, free-will, and divine foreknowledge. Some observations, finally, are made as regards Chaucer's apparent irreverence and the fact that before his death he probably would have been disturbed, "if he had missed absolution, unction, and the viaticum. We cannot affirm that this is so, but it is what is to be supposed of the sort of man he appears to have been."³⁷

In the previous quotations of this chapter, it is evident that these adversaries to the orthodoxy of the Parson or to the orthodoxy of Chaucer or to both may be refuted in one of three possible ways: either by direct refutation of the objections, or by a comparison between Wyclif's doctrines and the Parson's doctrine, or by quoting the authorities opposed to the position of the objectors. The remainder of this chapter will

36 Ibid., 69-70.

37 Ibid., 76.

be devoted to the first two means of refutation, while Chapter V will present the last.

With regard to Muriel Bowden's position, there is not the shred of evidence that Chaucer and Wyclif even talked with one another when both were members of the Royal Household. Perhaps they did meet, perhaps they did not. It hardly seems necessary to conclude that everyone in the King's service knew everyone else, any more than to conclude that everyone in a modern city hall knows everyone else.

Muriel Bowden's remark that the great reformer's sincerity and eloquence may have moved the "impressionable poet"³⁸ has little validity. She has made a mere conjecture with no specific occasions to prove her opinion. Because a great poet has a high sensitive nature for beauty and the artistic, it does not follow that he is, given the occasion--which is not actually there!--deeply impressed by the blatant cries of a radical speaker.

Much to the point, she maintains that the idealized Parson has been invested by Chaucer with many Wycliffian characteristics. Although she fails to mention these characteristics,

38 Cf. p. 55.

she is undoubtedly referring to those lines of Chaucer studied by other objectors to Chaucer's orthodoxy.

Her comment that "Chaucer could hardly have been unaffected by such widespread interest among his friends in Wyclif's ideas"³⁹ fails to take into account that Wyclif was in the mind of John of Gaunt an instrument for political use. As was mentioned in the quotation from Kemp Malone,⁴⁰ John of Gaunt was plundering the rich ecclesiastics for his own use. If any reader of Chaucer may conjecture in the fashion of Muriel Bowden, could he not say: although Chaucer was aware of abuses in the Church, he probably had no desire to play the fool that Wyclif played in the hands of John of Gaunt. Perhaps this is the extent of Wycliffian influence on the keen mind of Chaucer.

Of all Muriel Bowden's opinions on the Parson, the one which is most vulnerable comes when she briefly analyzes a statement in the Chaucerian text: "Thus, in company with 'our Hooste,' we may 'smelle a Lollere in the wynd,' and be almost certain that there is solid substance to give rise to the odour."⁴¹ How can one who claims to be a thorough critic of the Canterbury Tales

39 Ibid.

40 Cf. pp. 25-26.

41 Cf. p. 55.

possibly consider literally the references to the Parson as having the "smelle" of "a Lollere"! The very phrase is jokingly worded, and--beyond a doubt--even though repeated, always said jokingly.

The charge of Professor Loomis is that Chaucer adheres to Wycliffian ideas because he makes a triple reference to the Gospel and Christ's teaching, when portraying the Parson; and he makes constant use of the phrase, "Christ and his apostles."⁴² He also points out that the Parson never denies the two accusations that he is a Lollard.⁴³ The facts of the triple reference and the use of the phrase about Christ and His Apostles are undeniable. Yet such mentions of the Gospel are perfectly orthodox. It would be heretical for a Catholic to turn to any other source than the Gospel and the Church for the true principles of Christian living. The fact that Chaucer's Parson uses the Gospel as a guide to truth does not make him a Lollard. He is exercising his right to return to one of the fonts of spiritual truth. There is no more right to apply the phrase of Scripture: "Christ and His Apostles" exclusively to the works of John Wyclif, than there is to apply the same phrase to the works of Roman Catholic authors in general.

42 Cf. p. 56.

43 Ibid.

The fact that the Parson failed to reply to the two direct accusations concerning "a Lollere" is not a sign that he is a Lollard, but rather that he has a sense of humor. And so does Chaucer!

The reply here offered as regards the Parson's use of the Scriptural phrase, "Christ and His Apostles," is equally applicable to the insistence of Doris Ives that the Parson is a Lollard because of Chaucer's opening descriptive phrase, "a man of religion." According to her, this descriptive phrase is a normal usage in Lollard tracts.⁴⁴ Certainly the phrase is not exclusively used by Lollards. It is a fitting appositive for any religious person.

The whole discussion on the question which Doris Ives presents: "Why should Chaucer use this phrase which . . . meant: 'a member of a religious order'?"⁴⁵ is easily answered. Seemingly in her favor would be the orderly division of L. F. Salzman: "The clergy, whose concern was, in theory, with spiritual matters, looked to the Pope as their earthly head, had their own law and courts, and stood apart from the laity, whose head was the king. Further, we may divide the laity into three classes--nobles,

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

traders, and labourers, which three classes we may see reproduced in the clergy by the prelates (the bishops and great abbots and priors), the 'regular' clergy (monks and friars--the professional men of religion, and the ordinary parish priests and chaplains."⁴⁶

Here it may be concluded that "men of religion" refers to monks and friars. Salzman's very next paragraph shows that all the divisions of these classes of society were not always as distinct as just presented: "While these classes of society are distinct, the dividing lines between them are not very definite. Even the distinction between clergy and laity tended in practice to become obscure."⁴⁷ It would, therefore, not be outlandish to refer to a person as a "man of religion." Just as today, any religious man may be called a "man of religion"--a man whose life is based on religion--so Chaucer might well have intended this meaning alone.

Doris Ives, next, identifies the Parson with Wyclif. Summarizing her argument: the Parson and Wyclif were learned men (unlike the average parson), both came from a family of farmers, both were often in adversity, both lived in parishes "with houses

⁴⁶ L. F. Salzman, English Life in the Middle Ages (London, 1926), p. 33. Underscoring added.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

fer asonder," both disliked "fables" and "exempla," both protested against the normal custom of "cursing for tithes," both gave of their superfluity to poor parishioners, and both treated confession briefly and indefinitely.⁴⁸ The comparison is far from striking. Each similarity stated lacks conclusiveness.

No one would deny that the Parson and John Wyclif were learned, although the Parson admits that he is "nat textueel,"⁴⁹ a statement hardly for the mouth of Wyclif. But there were other priests in England who were learned. Immediately before the terrible disasters of England's fourteenth century, education was rated as of the highest importance. "During the course of the thirteenth century, when so strong a current of intellectual activity and speculation had set in, the importance of education to the working clergy--at least to a considerable proportion of them--forced itself upon those who were the responsible rulers of the Church."⁵⁰ Surely some of these members of the working clergy survived the Plague; at least enough survived to invalidate that Wyclif was the only "average parson" who had any learning.

48 Cf. p. 57.

49 Pars. Prol., 57, Complete Works, p. 272.

50 Francis Aidan Gasquet, D.D., The Black Death of 1348 and 1349 (London, 1908), p. 246.

Doris Ives finds similarity between the Parson and the "great reformer" since both are from the families of farmers. This is hardly unusual in a nation whose livelihood depended largely on her agrarian industry. Both men, also, had often been in adversity--a statement much too general to merit a specific conclusion. Both men lived in parishes "with houses for asonder," --a statement which even she admits is a weak proof. Both men disliked "fables" and "exempla"--yet, is the Parson's Tale devoid of all illustrations?⁵¹ And if a "fable" were coarse, any respectable churchman would frown upon it.

Doris Ives and others who agree with her point to the protest of both men against the normal custom of "cursing for tithes." Such unreasonable "cursing" is against the principles of the Gospel and of the Church. It is perfectly within the right of an orthodox priest to object to the abuse of an ecclesiastical power for collecting tithes. Such injustice to the unfortunate poor is objectively wrong, and must be corrected. Since an orthodox priest would instinctively object to this abuse, it remains very possible that Chaucer's Parson is such a priest. At least, Doris Ives has a proposition far from conclusive. It is rightly conjectured that any worthy priest would give his superfluity to

⁵¹ Pars. Tale, 112, Complete Works, p. 274, where penitence is compared to a tree.

the poor.

Finally, where John Wyclif treated confession quickly and indefinitely, one reading of the Parson's Tale will show that Chaucer's Parson recognized it as an absolute essential to those who sinned seriously after Baptism.

In complete opposition to Doris Ives, it is evident beyond any doubt that the Parson was on the pilgrimage; otherwise, how could he be present at the Tabard Inn and then be among the travellers as they journey into Canterbury? The Parson, then, is certainly not John Wyclif, for it is contrary to the teachings of Wyclif and the Lollards to go on pilgrimages.

John S. P. Tatlock's remarks on the identity of the Parson fall into the customary objections already cited. He too centers his attention on "cursing for tithes" and indicates Wyclif's similar reluctance, omitting however the reluctance of any good, orthodox priest. After Tatlock quotes the lines in the Summoner's portrait which refer to the archdeacon's curse, his commentary is hardly apt. He maintains that Chaucer is speaking lightly and skeptically of both excommunication and absolution.⁵² Nothing is farther from the truth! The lines quoted⁵³ by Tatlock

52 Cf. p. 60.

53 Cf. p. 59.

first describe the Summoner's re-action to the archdeacon's power to excommunicate and then Chaucer's re-action to this power. Once more it is the distinction between the abuse which the Summoner practices and the truth of a Gospel principle: to bind on earth and in heaven; to loose on earth and in heaven. There is no difficulty in finding some fear in Chaucer at possible excommunication, and a sigh of relief at the sign of absolution. At least Doctor Tatlock would seem to indicate this, as was cited on page 60. Chaucer clearly indicates that the Summoner's view is totally wrong: "But wel I woot he lyed right in dede."⁵⁴ The Summoner was lying and Chaucer interjects the truth.

Doctor Tatlock is inconsistent in looking upon these lines of Chaucer as a masterpiece "of noncommitment,"⁵⁵ and then saying that Chaucer treats excommunication and absolution lightly. Supposing the second assumption as Tatlock's actual interpretation, how can the commentator read the text any other way than as a rebuke against the ugly Summoner for speaking lightly on such great censures? In addition, Tatlock argues that this light-spirited attitude of Chaucer toward excommunication and absolution is seen in line 661: "For curs wol slee right as

54 Ibid.

55 Treated in Bowden, p. 268.

assoillying savith." If anything, Chaucer's tone here is very serious. Tatlock investigates the "curs," and rhetorically asks: "Who but a narrow and ill-informed ecclesiastic would say that an archdeacon's ban for concubinage would slay a soul?"⁵⁶ He correctly insists that a Significavit merely has the power to imprison, not to damn; therefore, Chaucer, who of course would know this, is joking. In refutation to Tatlock, need more be said than that the Significavit even in Chaucer's text is not identified with the "curse" of the archdeacon or bishop? Chaucer does not say that the Significavit will slay the soul, but he does say that the "curse" of excommunication will. Tatlock is concerned with line 661, which does not even have the word Significavit in it.

Muriel Bowden is helpful in clarifying Tatlock's confusion of terms:

Those who had sinned or resisted the rulings of the ecclesiastical courts (courts in which the Church as plaintiff, was also judge and jury!) were excommunicated; forty days were then given each contumacious person--nearly always a fine of some sort; if at the end of the forty-day period no reparation were made, the presiding bishop or archdeacon reported this fact to the Chancery, and a writ of Significavit (so called because that was the initial word), or de excommunicato capiendo,

56 Cf. p. 59.

The arguments of Doctor Tatlock are far from conclusive! He, like Doris Ives, represents one of many readers of Chaucer who think subconsciously that Chaucer is at the dawn of the Reformation and not in the midst of a vital Catholicism. In order to answer any future objections, it will be necessary to prove essentially that the heretical position of John Wyclif and the position of Chaucer's Parson are fundamentally different.

We take for granted here the previous conclusions in the discussion on the validity of the Parson's Tale as ascribed by Chaucer to the Parson.⁶⁰ Chaucer's Parson shows extraordinary orthodoxy in this sermon to the travellers. The constant reference to the early fathers of the Church, the frequent mention of Holy Church, the insistence on lawful auricular confession, the exhortation to receive the Holy Eucharist, the exhortation to use Church sacramentals, the vivid recognition of the heinousness of mortal sin, the need to root out venial sins, the insistence on obedience, the praise of the lofty dignity of the priesthood, and the recognition of the necessary mediation of the priest between God and man--all these points are as thoroughly Roman Catholic today as they were six hundred years ago. Actual quotations from the sermon will prove these points.

60 Cf. pp. 50-53.

The Parson quotes Saint Augustine, Saint John Chrysostom, and Saint Jerome--to mention only a few of the fathers of the Church: "Seint Augustyn seith 'But he be penytent for his olde synful lyf, he may nat bigynne the newe clene lif,'"61 "For which seith Seint John Crisostom: 'Penitence destreyneth a man to accepte benyghnely every payne that hym is enjoyned, . . . ,"62 and "for, as Seint Jerome seith, 'At every tyme that me remembreth of the day of doom I quake;"63

Rather evident is the fact that Chaucer does not find need to mention the fathers of the Church when referring to the Parson in the General Prologue. Still, from other parts of the General Prologue, Chaucer's own criterion of proper religious conduct is the rule or dictum of a Father of the Church. The famous example is with reference to the Monk:

The reule of seint Maure or of seint Beneit
By cause that it was old and somdel streit.⁶⁴

And another:

Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?⁶⁵

61 Pars. Tale., 96, Complete Works, p. 273.

62 Ibid., 108, p. 274.

63 Ibid., 158, p. 275.

64 Gen. Prol., 173-174, Ibid., p. 21.

65 Ibid., 186-187.

The attitude of John Wyclif toward the Fathers of the Church is not an essential point of his doctrine, but in the Enchiridion Symbolorum: "44. Augustinus, Benedictus et Bernardus damnati sunt, nisi poenituerint de hoc quod habuerunt possessiones et instituerunt et intraverunt religiones: et sic, a Papa usque ad ultimum religiosum, omnes sunt haeretici."⁶⁶ This is another error of John Wyclif, which shows that he did not have the respect for the Fathers of the Church which the Parson had, and also Chaucer.

The name of Holy Church graces several parts of the Parson's Tale. "Another is, when a man hath synned openly, of which synne the fame is openly spoken in the contree, and thanne hooly chirche by juggement destreyneth hym for to do open penaunce,"⁶⁷ and another example: "Certes, al this thyng is deffended by God and by hooly chirche."⁶⁸

There is respect by Chaucer's Parson for the Pope and the order of sovereignty in the Church:

The Pope calleth hymself servant of the servantz of God; but for as muche as the estat of hooly chirche ne myghte nat han be, ne the commune profit myght nat han be, kept, ne pees and rest in erthe, but if

66 Denzinger, p. 243.

67 Pars. Tale, 103, Complete Works, p. 274.

68 Ibid., 605, p. 293.

God hadde ordeyned that som men hadde hyer degree
and som men lower, / therfore was sovereyntee ordeyned
to kepe and mayntene and deffenden hire underlynges
or hire subgetz in resoun, as ferforth as it lith in
hire power, and nat to destroyen hem ne confounde.⁶⁹

As for Wyclif, the Catholic Church, the Pontiff, and the hierarchy were considered as instruments of Satan.⁷⁰ Wyclif's illogical theory on dominion would not even exclude the Pontiff: "To Wycliffe, it was the personal relation, the immediate dependence of the individual man upon God, that made him worthy or unworthy; it was his own character, and not his office, that constituted him what he really was. The Pope himself, if a bad man, lost his entire right to lordship."⁷¹ Even in Wyclif's earlier doctrine, the Pope is not an essential element in the Church and the clergy are hardly necessary: "That the Pope may fall into sin is as essential a part of Wycliffe's doctrine as it was of Ockham's. More than this, he has already arrived at the conclusion that the Pope is no necessary element in the constitution of the Christian Church, however desirable his existence may be. . . . Wycliffe not only maintains that Pope and cardinals might conceivably be dispensed with, but even says that he can imagine a state of society

69 Ibid., 772-773, p. 300.

70 Cf. p. 25.

71 Reginald Lane Poole, Wycliffe and Movements for Reform (New York, 1888), p. 94.

in which the Church should consist solely of laymen."⁷² Finally, there is the blunt statement which removes all doubt about Wyclif's position: "It was the Great Schism which changed Wycliffe from a critic to a declared opponent of the Papacy."⁷³

Chaucer's Parson insists on auricular confession which must be legal: "Now for as muche as the seconde partie of Penitence stant in Confessioun of mouth, as I bigan in the firste chapitre, I seye," ⁷⁴ And: "The seconde condicioun is that thy shrift be lawful, that is to seyn, that thow that shryvest thee, and eek the preest that hereth thy confessioun, been verrailly in the feith of hooly chirche; /" ⁷⁵ To Wyclif, confession was totally unnecessary.⁷⁶

Chaucer's Parson sees the need for the Eucharist⁴ and sacramentals in a good Christian life: "And certes, cones a yeere atte leeste wey it is lawful for to been housled; for certes, cones a yeere alle thynges renovellen,"⁷⁷ and: "Men may also re-freyne venial synne by receyvynge worthily of the precious body

72 Ibid., p. 97.

73 Ibid., p. 101.

74 Pars. Tale, 957, Complete Works, p. 309.

75 Ibid., 1013, p. 311.

76 Cf. p. 24

77 Pars. Tale, 1026, Complete Works, p. 312.

of Jhesu Crist; / by receyvyng eek of hooly water . . . and by blessyng of bisshopes and of preestes, and by oother goode werkes."⁷⁸ John Wyclif and his followers, on the other hand, were much opposed to even the idea of the Eucharist and sacramentals: "The most explicit statement of the opinions of the early Lollards is centered in the document commonly known as the Conclusions of 1395. This manifesto asserts . . . that transubstantiation was a feigned miracle and led people to idolatry; that prayers made over wine, bread, water, oil, salt, wax, incense, altars of stone, church walls, vestments, mitres, crosses, stones, were magical and should not be allowed."⁷⁹ The first errors of Wyclif condemned by the council of Constance in 1415 concerned the Eucharist.⁸⁰

Lollards failed to recognize the distinction between mortal and venial sin.⁸¹ The result was an over-emphasis of certain actions as bad. For example, the possession of land by clerics was looked upon as far more grievous than it actually was, even though in some cases it entailed undue or sinful attachment. The very fact that the Parson exhorts men to weed out venial sins

78 Ibid., 384-385, p. 284.

79 -----, "Lollards," Encyclopedia Britannica (New York, 1929), 341.

80 Cf. p. 24.

81 Cf. p. 21.

by Communion and sacramentals shows that he makes the proper distinction regarding types of sin.⁸²

Wyclif and Lollards were acting in disobedience to Church authority. Yet Chaucer's Parson teaches: "Of pacience comth obedience, thurgh which a man is obedient to Crist and to alle hem to whiche he oghte to been obedient in Crist. / And understond wel that obedience is perfit, when that a man dooth gladly and hastily, with good herte entierly, al that he sholde do. / Obedience generally is to perfourne the doctrine of God and of his sovereyns, to whiche hym oghte to ben obeisaunt in alle rightwisnesse. /"⁸³

Wyclif would have the whole clerical state lowered to the level of the laity. Every man would be his own theologian. Poole again comments: "It is this principle of the dependence of the individual man upon God alone and none else that distinguishes Wycliffe's from any other system of the Middle Ages By this formula all laymen became priests, and all priests laymen, so far as their religious position was concerned: all held of God, and on the same terms of service."⁸⁴ The Parson, on

82 Cf. p. 76.

83 Pars. Tale, 673-675, Complete Works, p. 296.

84 Poole, p. 88.

the contrary, recognizes the need of a clerical state: "The
 hond of God is myghty in confessioun, for therby God foryeveth
 thee thy synnes, for he allone hath the power. / And this
 humylitee shal been in herte, and in signe outward; for right as
 he hath humylitee to God in his herte, right so sholde he humble
 his body outward to the preest, that sit in Goddes place. / "85

The work of this chapter has been of a negative nature.
 Muriel Bowden, Professor Loomis, and Doris Ives have in varying
 degrees struggled to Protestantize the Parson. But are there
 not other critics much more in tune with the true attitude of
 Chaucer? The answer merits the following Chapter.

85 Pars. Tale, 987-988, Complete Works, p. 310.

CHAPTER V

CHAUCER--ORTHODOX CATHOLIC

Chaucer points to the Parson, who is a worthy, orthodox Catholic priest. To say that he is not a Lollard is equivalent to saying that he is orthodox, for these are the only possibilities in Chaucer's Age. Chaucer is not advocating the Reformation of the Church from without.

In the last chapter, the defense of the Parson's orthodoxy has been by refutation of objections to that orthodoxy and by a comparison between John Wyclif's position and the matter in the Parson's Tale. The description of the Parson in the General Prologue and in the Parson's Prologue is that of an orthodox priest too. Since so many objections from Protestant critics referred to these two Prologues, refutation of these objections was the proof that the Parson is orthodox in these two sections also.

A comprehensive view of the wealth of opinion favoring the Parson as orthodox or, at least, as not a Lollard is the objective of this chapter. It seems only proper to give an appraisal of the critics who agree on the orthodoxy of Chaucer's

Parson. Naturally, as with any problem, there are some commentators who favor the side of orthodoxy, but also wish to straddle the fence. And there are others who militantly defend the orthodoxy of Chaucer. Emile Legouis is an example of the first type:

In strong contrast to these degenerates and parasites, stands the figure of a true priest, who wins both respect and love. He may not of himself redeem a faithless and dishonest clergy, but he shows at least the attainable beauty of true religion. The good village Parson is, with his brother the Ploughman, the only Christ-like person in the whole company. He is perfectly orthodox, but nevertheless he owes much of his moral beauty to the Lollards. It was their ardour for reform, their endeavour to find in the Gospel a protection against an odious discipline and accumulated superstitions, which brought him back to the primitive and to essential charity.¹

Legouis' position might well be rephrased in order to bring out what is objectively stated. Chaucer's Parson is undoubtedly orthodox in Legouis' opinion. Apparently well-read in Lollard tracts, the commentator perhaps found in these writings an attractive spirit of "rebellion" not expressed in Church writings. When he states that the Parson "owes much of his moral beauty to the Lollards" he merely intends to favor the rebellion in so far as it corrects the vices in churchmen. This is an orthodox position, because it corrects an objective wrong. Abuses of the Gospel's principles and of the true teaching of the Church should

1 Emile Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer (London, 1928), p.151.

be corrected. Legouis' attributing of "moral beauty to the Lollards" shows that he does not comprehend the essential nature of Lollardy, which is rooted in untruth and therefore incapable of "moral beauty" or of causing "moral beauty." His later statement in the same quotation quoted above: ". . . their endeavour to find in the Gospel a protection against an odious discipline and accumulated superstitions . . ." must at first startle many a Catholic reader. But history has proved that the discipline of certain churchmen was often extremely unreasonable; and, with the advent of men like the Pardoner and other repulsive exploiters, the fiery sermons and fake relics which were forced on sincere and devout peasant people might well have turned them into superstitious fanatics.

Marchette Chute refuses to make Chaucer part of the Lollard movement. In a gentle manner, she places him among several critics of the Church who acted in a thoroughly orthodox way: "These men, like Chaucer's good friend Ralph Strode, were sure that the Church could be reformed without altering its existing structure. Wyclif became increasingly sure that it could not."² Further: "Chaucer would not have made a successful reformer. To be a reformer requires the ability to look at one's

² Marchette Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer of England (New York, 1946), p. 201.

subject in a broad and general way and not permit one's attention to be attracted to the oddities and inconsistencies of individual human beings."³

But Marchette Chute's final conclusions regarding Chaucer are not on the orthodox side at all. After her treatment of Lollardy, she classifies the Church as the proponent of "the individual . . . subordinated to the group,"⁴ and the reformer Wyclif with others is revered as one who "heralded the growth of the new doctrine of individualism."⁵ Immediately Chaucer is interjected into the picture as a writer who decides "most unmedievally"⁶ to portray travellers not "as samples of various social orders but as real human beings."⁷ This according to Marchette Chute is Chaucer's contribution to the rise of individualism. This according to her is the extent of his endeavor to bring about reform after the manner of Wyclif.

Her theory would be of some weight save for Chaucer's strong tendency to the general portrayal of each character in

3 Ibid., p. 200.

4 Ibid., p. 203-204.

5 Ibid., p. 204.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 205.

the Canterbury Tales. True it is that specific characteristics are noted in the pilgrims; yet, at the same time they have universal traits and characteristics. Is it not strange that Chaucer never considers two individuals of the same type of work? Why are their occupations so different if not to render them for the most part representatives of whole classes or groups of people? The marvellous art of Chaucer rests in his ability to make a type of person so vividly real.

W. W. Lawrence is an example of a commentator who is militantly in defense of the orthodoxy of Chaucer's Parson:

But it would be a great mistake to think of Chaucer as a Wickliffite or a Lollard, or as anticipating the ideas of the Reformation. In the Tales he strikes at the corruption of typical individuals, never at doctrines. Nothing in his ironical portraits suggests the moral indignation of Langland. Castigation of obvious abuses was a very different matter from questioning, as Wyclif did, the fundamentals of dogma. The Host's disrespectful words to the Parson, "O Jankin, be ye there? I smelle a Loller in the wynd" (B 1172-3) do not suggest sympathy with that sect. The Lollards disapproved of pilgrimages.⁸

Thomas R. Lounsbury launches an attack against the proponents that the Parson is a Lollard:

Men of holy life, of fervent faith, of lofty ideals have not been so rare, it is to be hoped, in any period since the founding of the Christian church, that the picture of a typical representative of the class must be assumed to be that of one particular

⁸ W. W. Lawrence, Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales (London, 1950), p. 65.

man. What evidence upon the subject exists--and it is certainly of the scantiest--would point, if in any way, to an opposite conclusion. At the time the Prologue was presumably written, Wycliffe had been dead for several years. Nor are several of the details in the lives and characters of the poetical and historic figure in very exact harmony. The Parson of the sketch belongs to the lowliest station in life. He is the brother of the Plowman. He is poor by birth and remains poor by choice. He walks from one end of his parish to the other in all sorts of weather. Wycliffe, doubtless, could have done all this, had there been need. There is no reason, however, to suppose that he ever felt the need. . . . The man whom Chaucer had in mind was one of the class of humbler curates who are content to lead lives of obscurity and find their chief happiness in doing good. . . .⁹

Without going into great detail, D. S. Brewer takes a firm stand in favor of the Parson's orthodoxy. In his recent Chaucer, he states: "Some have thought that the Parson has more than a tinge of Lollardy in him. But the Lollards usually condemned pilgrimages, while this Parson is taking part in one. However, Lollards and orthodox Christians shared very similar ideals, although the Lollards introduced modifications in the doctrine and practice of religion. There is no suggestion of such heresy in the Parson."¹⁰

Most fitting of all is the position of Gilbert Keith

⁹ Thomas R. Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings, (New York, 1892), II, 483-484.

¹⁰ D. S. Brewer, Chaucer (London, 1953), p. 177.

Chesterton, whose healthy, vital outlook on Chaucer and his age wins the highest praise. Chesterton's mind grasps the realities of a distant age and gracefully draws them into the present. In the style of the essayist, he pens:

But those who, reading history backwards, look for the later type called the Protestant in a medieval man who was not even a Lollard, may find in every sense a moral final answer in the final pages of the great poem. It may be suspected that few of them have read as far as those final pages; still less had the heroic tenacity to read through them

They are naturally attached to the beautiful description of the Parson, which sounds in many ways very simple, and which occurs at the beginning of The Tales and is therefore easily skimmed even by the superficial. They remark very truly that Chaucer, for some reason or other, evidently preferred the parish priests to the monks and friars; though I know not why there should be supposed to be something vaguely Protestant about preferring one set of Catholic priests to another. There is certainly nothing very Protestant about taking it for granted that one medieval Catholic must have been right in his preferences. Nevertheless, those who imagine that Jesus Christ and the Gospels were first discovered by Martin Luther, and are never mentioned among Catholics, have hinted in a hundred ways that the mention of these things in the first description of the Parson shows him to be a good hearty Protestant Parson, with Muscular Christianity and Morning Service at eleven o'clock. May I inflict on such readers the somewhat heavy medieval penance of reading what is (very deceptively) called "The Parson's Tale," with which Chaucer deliberately winds up the whole series of tales? . . . It is appallingly long and elaborate, but it does not trip on a single term; and there is written all over it in large letters *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur*.¹¹

11 G. K. Chesterton, Chaucer (London, 1932) pp.257-258.

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This thesis should well substantiate these clear and novel statements.

If Chaucer's stand is orthodox, may he be called a reformer in any sense? Marchette Chute hardly thinks so, for Chaucer is tied down to "oddities and inconsistencies of individual human beings."¹² Gerould joins with Marchette Chute, but makes a careful distinction: Chaucer is a sound moralist, but not a reformer.¹³ Gerould argues that Chaucer took a sensible view of the situation, that he used "reasoned acquiescence," which he insists is not approval, that Chaucer was not the "heroic" type.¹⁴ Kemp Malone sees less of the reformer and much more of the artist in Chaucer. For Chaucer, the "grist to his artistic mill" was found in the events around him.¹⁵ Chaucer was instructive, Malone will admit, but like Shakespeare's his chief interest lay in his art. "He is a story-teller, not a propagandist; a poet, not a preacher."¹⁶

Although Chaucer's artistic purpose in writing the Tales is primary, no critic will deny that a part of his subject

12 Chute, p. 200.

13 Gordon Hall Gerould, Chaucerian Essays (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952), p. 101.

14 Ibid.

15 Kemp Malone, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore, 1951), p. 12.

16 Ibid.

matter is the treatment of abuses, nor will one deny that Chaucer shows distaste toward these vices. His line about the Friar is aptly phrased: "And rage he koude, as it were right a whelp."¹⁷ Chaucer here expresses his true view of such base men, and he wants his readers to know that he does not agree with the Friar's tactics.

Reformation is correctly defined as a restoration to a former state. This, Chaucer certainly desired in the case of the Church in England's fourteenth century. But, does this "wishing" suffice to rank the Poet among the reformers within the Church?

Marchette Chute's observation that Chaucer lacks a broad and general view of his subject and therefore is not a reformer is manifestly incorrect. The critic is wrapped up in her theory on individualism. Chaucer, according to previous discussion, has only some individuals as such going to Canterbury. The travellers ride along with their colorful, even quaint, traits; yet they are for the most part identified--persons without real names and definite, conclusive characteristics--and must be considered in general as representatives of the general types which depict England's fourteenth-century society and the human race's century-old virtues and vices. Chaucer, therefore, has a

17 Gen. Prol., 257, Complete Works, p. 22.

broad and general view.

Gerould's distinction of a "sound moralist" as opposed to a "reformer" demands attention to these terms. No one indeed objects to Chaucer as a sound moralist, but Gerould's reasons for excluding the Poet as a reformer are insufficient. What Gerould says is that Chaucer is not a reformer because he fails to put his ideas into practice or action. Chaucer fails because he considers such execution to be inconsequential. The result is a "reasoned acquiescence," which is the only sensible course of action. This opinion does Chaucer a terrible injustice. Chaucer, seeing the situation, did act! He got his message across to the people of England in a way far superior to Wyclif's and his followers'. The Poet is clever enough to present the situation vividly and let the situation speak for itself.

Even the most antagonistic cleric, who is caught up in the laughter of Chaucer's audiences, might be rendered benevolent by this reformer. Any man who proclaims the true philosophy of life in an age when that philosophy is ignored and abused is a reformer. This was Geoffrey Chaucer's goal; though not his primary objective, it was at any rate his secondary objective in writing the Canterbury Tales. The Poet's place is not among the Lollards, nor does he take his stand beside brilliant reformers within the Church; rather, he walks the path of a sincere,

orthodox Catholic who artfully satirizes the deplorable conditions of the Church in the hope of an internal reform.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the previous chapters has been a study of Chaucer's attitude toward the Church of the fourteenth century. By an analysis of the five principal churchmen of the Canterbury Tales, the conclusion reached rated Chaucer as a good, orthodox Catholic and, with some reservation, as an "internal reformer." Various procedures were employed to substantiate this conclusion: a study of the churchmen whom Chaucer presents in the Canterbury Tales with special emphasis on the much-admired "povre Persoun of a Toun," an evaluation of criticism opposed to the orthodoxy of the Poor Parson and--in turn--Chaucer, and an appraisal of criticism favoring the Parson's and Chaucer's orthodoxy.

Before the study of Chaucer's churchmen, it seemed only proper to make some necessary observations on the two-fold purpose of the Canterbury Tales and to depict clearly the condition of the Church in England's fourteenth century.

As to the purpose of the Canterbury Tales, the primary objective is the presentation of rollicking tales for the sake of entertainment. A secondary purpose is the presentation of terrible vices of fourteenth century clergymen in the hope of a possi-

ble "internal reform." Of course, the full realization of the secondary purpose rests on the evidence and reasoning of the entire thesis.

Since Protestant commentators frequently cited Chaucer's so-called derogatory attitude toward the Church, a sense of fair play prompts a consideration of the Church in England's fourteenth century. Worldly self-seeking clergymen, who made religion a business rather than a sacrifice, overran England. Their disobedience to Papal Decrees crippled Roman Catholicism in England. The Black Plague of 1348 and afterwards left a heavy mark on the English population with a deplorable decrease in clergymen. The Peasant's Revolt of 1381 is a further sign of England's internal strife. These were the years of the Great Western Schism, in the course of which there were always two and sometimes three rival claimants to the infallible power of the Keys of Peter. These were the years too of the Hundred Years War. All of these causes undoubtedly diminished the inner strength of the Church. Yet, as though this were not enough, Protestantism in its early form of John Wyclif and the Lollards launched its attack on the Church from the outside.

In the midst of this wretched period, the gifted pen of an immortal poet portrayed the churchmen of the times. This portrayal reveals to the reader Chaucer's mind toward the Church. The Monk, the Friar, the Summoner, and the Pardoner constitute

one type of churchman; the Parson represents another type. With undeniable skill and insight, Chaucer presents the proud, tepid, sensual, and dishonest clergy of the Church. With that same keenness, he lauds the saintly activity of the Poor Parson. Nevertheless, nowhere in the entire Canterbury Tales does Chaucer consider the Divine Authority of the Church conterminous with the human frailty of her members.

Naturally the proportion of four unworthy churchmen to one of unquestioning integrity stimulates Protestant commentary. This is particularly true because there is the added incentive to identify the Parson with John Wyclif or an early Lollard.

In a positive manner, the main tenets of Lollardy have been compared with the doctrine preached by the Parson with the results favoring the orthodoxy of the Parson. In a negative manner, the objections of Muriel Bowden, Professor Loomis, and Doris Ives have been discussed and refuted. Since Kemp Malone's comments seem neither too Protestant nor too orthodox, this critic received special attention.

G. K. Chesterton, the Reverend Terence Connolly, S.J., Emile Legouis, and Robert Root had their own favorable opinions on the Parson's orthodoxy and, in turn, Chaucer's.

Through the centuries, the Church has fostered a high regard for literary achievement. Frequently enough it is stated that she is the inspiration to artists everywhere. But such a

statement is equated by Protestants with pietistic wishing. Few will deny that the Age of Chaucer was an age of weakness for the Church; yet, even in her hour of physical exhaustion, the Church stood strong in the men of high spiritual quality who refused to forsake what she had so carefully taught them. The orthodox Parson was of such quality. Chaucer's recognition of this quality and this orthodoxy is an outstanding contribution of his masterpiece, Canterbury Tales, and it reveals the Poet's own religious belief.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mr. James Joseph Creighton, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Signature of Adviser